

THE 'COMINGS' OF CHRIST IN REVELATION 2-3

Robert L. Thomas
Professor of New Testament

Six of the seven messages of Christ in Rev 2-3 contain references to His coming. In three instances He promises to come and deliver His faithful from persecution, and in three He threatens to come and judge the unfaithful. In all six His coming is imminent, whether for deliverance or for judgment. The only way this can happen is for the deliverance—the rapture of the church—and the judgment—the beginning of Daniel's seventieth week—to occur simultaneously. The two chapters provide three more passages that refer to His coming indirectly. The forecast in these too is for His return at any moment. A survey of other relevant NT passages reflects the same dual imminence for the two events. The phenomena surrounding these predicted comings lead inevitably to the conclusion that Christ's return for His church must be pretribulational, because this is the only way to explain satisfactorily how the two future events can be simultaneous.

* * * * *

In Revelation 2-3 Christ speaks of His coming explicitly in six of the messages to the seven churches of Asia. He does so in three of the messages through a form of the verb ἔρχομαι (*erchomai*, "I will come"¹) (2:5, 16; 3:11). In two of the messages he does so with the verb

¹Though ἔρχομαι (*erchomai*, "I will come") is present tense, contextual nuances in Revelation and the verbal idea of "coming" warrant construing it as a futuristic use of the present tense. The same understanding prevails in the verb's use in John 14:3: "I will come again and receive you to Myself."

ἐγὼ ἔρχομαι (ἐγὼ ἔρχομαι, "I come") (2:25; 3:3). In one message ἐγὼ εἰσερχομαι (*eiserchomai*, "I enter") refers to his coming (3:20). Smyrna is the only church that receives no word about a coming of the Lord.

The 'comings' fall into two categories, one with overtones of comfort and encouragement and the other with the tenor of threat and judgment. The 'comings' for judgment lend themselves to interpretations somewhat more controversial than those pertaining to deliverance and blessing, though one of the latter (3:20) poses a special challenge to interpreters. The following discussion will delve first into the positive 'comings.' Then it will investigate the timing and nature of the negative ones.

The next step will be to examine the implications the 'comings' in regard to the timing of the church's rapture. Next will come an inquiry into three indirect references to Christ's return in the seven messages. Lastly, this essay will survey briefly how the rest of the NT aligns with results of the study.

'COMINGS' FOR DELIVERANCE

Thyatira (2:25)

Among the promises of deliverance for the faithful, the word to the Thyatiran church in 2:25 is the earliest: "other than [this], hold fast what you have until I come." The loyal in the church had already received high marks for their works (2:19) and for their freedom from the defilements of Jezebel (2:24a). Christ has just promised them exemption from any further burden (2:24b). The exception to this promise in v. 25² is the urgent need³ that they continue to hold fast in the face of opposition they already faced, i.e., the pressure exerted by Jezebel and her followers.

The incentive to do so was the nearness of Christ's return. No matter how severe enemy pressures might become, the followers of Christ had the hope that His return was imminent.⁴ All they had to do was hold out a little longer, and their Lord would rescue them from the clutches of evil. The form $\epsilon\gamma\ \omicron\ (h)\ \acute{\iota}\nu$ (*h eq \O(\sim,e)x eq \O(\sim,o)*, "I will come") refers to Christ's return as it does twice in the message to Sardis (3:3). The truth of His coming provides motivation for moral action here as it does in five of the other six messages.

²Note the force of $\pi\lambda\eta\nu$ (*plen*, "other than [this]") in v. 25 (Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1—7, An Exegetical Commentary*, Kenneth Barker, gen. ed. [Chicago: Moody, 1992] 230).

³The aorist imperative $\kappa\rho\alpha\tau\eta\varsigma\alpha\tau\epsilon$ (*kratesate*, "hold fast") focuses on urgency (Thomas, 1—7231).

⁴"Imminent" means "ready to take place" (*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 10th ed. [Springfield, Mass: Merriam-Webster, 1993] 580). In the context of the present discussion it means that no biblical prophecy remains to be fulfilled prior to the predicted event. The scope of the present discussion does not permit a detailed response to Robert H. Gundry's attempt to equate "imminence" with "expectation" (cf. *The Church and the Tribulation* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973] 29-43). He is seemingly oblivious to the necessity of a pretribulational rapture created by part of the definition of "imminence" he endorses: "a possibility of occurrence at any moment" (*ibid.*, 29). His posttribulational view removes that possibility and thereby the imminence of Christ's return, yet he does not directly address the issue.

Philadelphia (3:11)

The deliverance promised to the church in Philadelphia in 3:11 resembles what Christ promised the church in Thyatira. Its admonition to "hold fast what you have" is along the lines of His earlier word for believers to hold their ground and not compromise because of persecution (cf. 2:25). This is a sort of motto for the faithful in each church.⁵ This time, however, rather than emphasizing urgency, the command stresses continuance and durability.⁶

The motive for tenacity in 3:11 is an anticipation of Christ's near return for deliverance. The basis for the anticipation is the promise that comes immediately after He describes the impending "hour of trial" in 3:10. The words $\epsilon\kappa\ \tau\omicron\ \nu\epsilon\ \lambda\omicron\gamma\epsilon\ \epsilon\ \rho\chi\omicron\mu\alpha\iota\ \tau\alpha\chi\upsilon$ (*erchomai tachy*, "I will come soon") express His promised coming in this instance. $\epsilon\ \rho\chi\omicron\mu\alpha\iota$ (*Erchomai*, "I will come"), of course, sounds the keynote of the whole book as stated in 1:7: "Behold, He comes with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him, and all the families of the earth will mourn over Him. Yes, amen." Incidentally, this is the fifth in a series of promises to the faithful in the Philadelphian church (cf. one promise in 3:8, two in 3:9, and one in 3:10).

The appending of "soon" ($\tau\alpha\chi\upsilon$, *tachy*) to His promised coming makes explicit what is only implicit in 2:25. It heightens the expectancy that Christ's coming to deliver the faithful from their difficult circumstances was not far away.⁷ The abruptness of the promise heightens its emphasis. Its placement immediately after His word about the coming "hour of trial" implies that this coming will accomplish the deliverance promised in v. 10. The attention to immediacy that the addition of "soon" brings is a principal note throughout the book. John sounds the note first in 1:1a in his use of the comparable $\epsilon\ \nu\ \tau\alpha\chi\epsilon\iota$ (*en tachei*, "soon"): "The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His slaves, the things that must happen soon." It is a note that sounds repetitively until the end: "And behold, I will come soon" (22:7a); "Behold, I will come soon" (22:12a); "Yes, I will come soon" (22:20).⁸

Another understanding of *en tachei* ("soon") in 1:1 has assigned it a different meaning of "speedily." It refers the expression to the speed with which the events

⁵Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman, 1933) 6:319.

⁶The command is present imperative of $\kappa\rho\alpha\tau\acute{\alpha}\nu$ (*krateō*, "I hold fast") as compared with the aorist imperative in 2:25 (Thomas, 1—7291 n. 68).

⁷Thomas, 1—7290.

⁸Richard Bauckham cites 1:1, 3; 2:16; 3:11; 22:7, 10, 12, 20 in observing that Revelation shares with most of the NT documents the feature of "imminent expectation": "John's prophecy is a revelation of 'what must soon take place.' . . . This cannot mean only that the great conflict of the church and the Empire is soon to *begin*, for the parousia itself is also said to be soon" (*The Theology of the Book of Revelation* [Cambridge: University Press, 1993] 147). He errs, however, in theorizing that this temporal imminence conflicts with eschatological delay in the book because he fails to allow for the separate stages in the future parousia of Christ (cf. *ibid.*, 157-59).

will transpire once they have begun. Proponents have cited the phrase's usage in five passages to support this meaning (cf. Luke 18:8; Acts 12:7; 22:18; 25:4; Rom 16:20),⁹ but in at least two of the five the meaning is debatable (cf. Luke 18:8; Rom 16:20). They have also noted the necessity of attributing error to the text if the meaning "soon" is correct. After all, it has been nineteen hundred years since the prediction and much of what the book prophesies has not yet begun to happen.¹⁰

This view does not do justice to the major emphasis of the book, however: the emphasis upon the shortness of time before fulfillment. That focus is repeatedly instrumental in bringing encouragement to God's people in the midst of their persecution. They do not have to wait long for relief to come, so they have incentive to persevere. To say that relief will come "speedily" or in rapid-fire sequence provides no encouragement, but to say that it will come "soon" does.¹¹

The words "for the time is near" in 1:3b provide reinforcement for assigning *en tachei* ("soon") in 1:1 the meaning of imminence. Fulfillment of the predicted events at any moment was and remains the hope of the church. John was not mistaken in this expectation. Those who think he was fail to recognize that the Apocalypse on occasion computes time in relation to the divine apprehension, a standard that differs from the strictly human approach.¹² John simply presented the imminence of the events foretold without attempting to set a time deadline by which they must occur.

The same outlook applies in the message to Philadelphia: Christ presents the imminence of His coming without setting a time limit for it to happen. It is an event that could come at any moment, suddenly and unexpectedly.¹³ Its nearness provides a motivation to be tenacious, because He will reward His own at that time. Thus the faithful must hold fast "that no one take your crown" (3:11c).

Laodicea (3:20)

The reference to Christ's return in the message to Laodicea comes in the verb *eiseleusomai* ("I will enter") in 3:20: "Behold, I am standing at the door and knocking; if any hears My voice and opens the door, I will enter to him and will eat supper with him, and he with Me." This reference to His second advent is not quite as obvious as those in 2:25 and 3:11, however. Identification of the coming in 3:20 hinges upon the connotation of the "door" earlier in the verse. Is it the door of the human heart or the eschatological door through which Christ will enter at His second advent?

⁹E.g., John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1966) 35.

¹⁰Alan F. Johnson, "Revelation," in *EBC*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981) 12:416; Homer Hailey, *Revelation, an Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 96; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 64-65.

¹¹Thomas, 1—755.

¹²*Ibid.*, 55-56.

¹³*Ibid.*, 290.

Regarding the former possibility, opinions vary over whether it is the heart of an unbeliever,¹⁴ that of a believer,¹⁵ or that of any person regardless of his spiritual condition.¹⁶ Depending on which it is, Christ would be offering forgiveness of sins, the opportunity of returning to fellowship, or an invitation to meet whatever the need might be, respectively. The truthfulness of all three variations is apparent, but it is problematic for all three that the figure of Christ's knocking at the door of *human hearts* is absent from this context.¹⁷

A reference to the eschatological door has strong support. Such a figure for Christ's return had wide usage among early Christians (cf. Matt 24:33; Mark 13:29; Luke 12:36; James 5:9).¹⁸ The source of the imagery, Song of Sol 5:1 ff., receives a comparable eschatological sense in Luke 12:35-38.¹⁹ The sense of an eschatological door also fits the pattern of three other messages where a reference to Christ's coming follows a command to repent (cf. 2:5, 16; 3:3) as this verse does (cf. 3:19).²⁰

An objection to this sense has been that Christ appears as a judge or a rewarder of the faithful rather than as a preacher of repentance in other NT passages where "door" is eschatological.²¹ The objection overlooks Rev 3:16, however, because that verse depicts Christ in very much of a judgmental role. The eschatological sense suits the context of 3:19 also in responding to the commanded repentance through a personal willingness to open the door.

An apparent difficulty with the eschatological view lies in the supposition that it conditions Christ's return on a positive human response rather than on the sovereign purpose of God (cf. Acts 1:6-7). This presents a situation similar to ones to be discussed later, where that advent apparently depends timewise on a negative human response to a command to repent (cf. 2:5, 16; 3:3). The problem is more apparent than real, however. The promised entrance of Christ and His consequent fellowship with the one opening the door come in two phases: a preliminary phase that is simultaneous with initial saving faith and an ultimate one at the time of Christ's second advent. To experience the preliminary phase assures participation in the ultimate phase. Saving faith assures participation in the supper with Christ, which the promise views as imminent, but the time of

¹⁴Richard Chenevix Trench, *Commentary on the Epistles to the Seven Churches in Asia* (reprint, London: Parker, Son, and Bourn, 1960) 279.

¹⁵William Kelly, *Lectures on the Revelation* (London: G. Morrish, n.d.), 87; Isbon T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John* (New York: Macmillan, 1919) 491.

¹⁶Albert Barnes, *The Book of Revelation* (New York: Harper, 1851) 1571.

¹⁷Beckwith, *Apocalypse* 491.

¹⁸Robertson, *Word Pictures* 6:323.

¹⁹James Moffatt, "The Revelation of St. John the Divine," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, W. Robertson Nicoll, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.) 5:373.

²⁰J. P. M. Sweet, *Revelation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, Pelican, 1979) 109.

²¹R. H. Charles, *The Revelation of St. John*, ICC (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1920) 1:101.

initial saving faith does not affect the timing of that supper. The faithful have already begun fellowship with Christ, but in another sense, present fellowship is only a down payment on the ultimate fellowship that has not yet begun.²²

Because of a failure to recognize the dual nature of fellowship with Christ, some have limited the promise's application to the point of conversion.²³ They make it more of an evangelistic plea than an offer to prepare for the Lord's coming.²⁴ The evidence is quite convincing, however, that the time of the promise's fulfillment is at Christ's return. In addition to evidence already cited, the "eschatological" *idou* (idou, "behold") in v. 20 argues for this meaning (cf. 3:8, 9) as do the broader context of the message (3:16, 18, 21), the analogy of five of the other six messages with their references to Christ's coming, and the broader context of Revelation (cf. 16:15).

A confirming consideration is the promise of participation in the supper with Christ later in 3:20. Most recognize this correctly as a reference to the marriage supper of the Lamb, which pictures fellowship in the future Messianic kingdom (19:9; cf. Matt 26:29; Mark 14:25; Luke 12:25-28; 22:30).²⁵ Eating with Messiah and ruling with Him, as in 3:21, commonly come together in this eschatological sense.²⁶ The supper aspect of the promise is sufficient by itself to fix the perspective of 3:20 as eschatological.

'COMINGS' FOR JUDGMENT

Ephesus (2:5)

The earliest threat of judgment against one of the Asian churches comes in 2:5, where the Lord warns the church at Ephesus, "Remember, therefore, whence you have fallen, and repent and do the first works. But if not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent." He admonishes this body to return to its first love (cf. 2:4), but if they choose not to do so, He threatens to take severe action against the church. The nature of that severe action is the issue to be resolved.

Wide opinion has it that it is a special coming in judgment to the Ephesian

²²Revelation 3:20 has another possible explanation that draws upon the Semitic construction explained below in connection with 2:5. The sense of the verse would be, "Behold, I am standing at the door and knocking; if any hears My voice and opens the door, *when I enter to him*, I will eat supper with him, and he with Me." This too points to an eschatological coming of Christ.

²³E.g., Trench, *Epistles*, 279; Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament* (London: Longmans, Green, 1903) 4:592; Charles, *Revelation* 1:100; G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, NCB (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 107.

²⁴Walvoord, *Revelation* 98; Johnson, "Revelation" 12:459.

²⁵J. B. Smith, *A Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald, 1961) 95; Beckwith, *Apocalypse* 491; E. W. Bullinger, *The Apocalypse or "The Day of the Lord"* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, n.d.) 208.

²⁶Sweet, *Revelation* 64.

church alone, a type of coming that supposedly fits the context more naturally.²⁷ Lee notes that the threat applies to only one lampstand, not several or all seven.²⁸ Mounce sees this understanding as more compatible with Christ's walking in the midst of the churches.²⁹ A reference to a special coming also coincides with the meaning of 2:22, it is said,³⁰ but the same debate exists there in the message to Thyatira as exists here in the one to Ephesus. Caird prefers this explanation too, pointing out that Christ does not speak of a worldwide crisis but a crisis of this church privately.³¹

The "special coming" approach does not give adequate attention to the book's broad context, however. If this were only a private coming to one church, it would bear no relationship to the apocalyptic part of Revelation (4:1–22:5), which is the heart of the twenty-two chapters. It also fails to notice the connection of the threat with the theme verse of the book, 1:7, where the present tense of the same verb, ερχεται (*erchetai*, "He comes"), speaks of Christ's eschatological coming. This verb repeatedly refers to Christ's return throughout the Apocalypse (1:7; 2:16; 3:11; 16:15; 22:7, 12, 20). An immediate visitation of preliminary judgment hardly does justice to the technical eschatological sense the verb must carry in a book of this nature. Aune perceives that this and other words about negative aspects of the parousia in Revelation 2–3 signal a threat of imminent eschatological judgment.³² Since references to Christ's second coming appear in the messages to Thyatira, Philadelphia, and Laodicea already surveyed, the best course is to adopt the view that this too is an eschatological coming, one to judge the rebellious, not to reward the faithful, however. The objection that Christ does not come personally to earth to inflict the punishments detailed in Revelation 4 ff. overlooks the fact that neither does He come personally to earth according to the "special coming" explanation. Making this a reference to an eschatological coming has the advantage over the "special coming" view, however, in that He does come personally to earth to climax the judgments of the coming hour of trial at the battle of Armageddon.

Connecting the threat with Christ's second advent raises another issue, however. Because failure to repent apparently triggers this coming for judgment, as it does the ones in 2:16 and 3:3, how could it refer to the parousia? The observation that it is inaccurate to have the return of Christ depend on man's refusal to repent is the principal reason that some do not refer this to eschatological

²⁷Beasley-Murray, *Revelation* 75.

²⁸Lee, "Revelation" 4:517.

²⁹Mounce, *Revelation* 89.

³⁰Beckwith, *Apocalypse* 450.

³¹G. V. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine*, HNTC (New York: Harper & Row, 1966) 32.

³²David E. Aune, "The Form and Function of the Proclamations to the Seven Churches [Revelation 2–3]," *NTS* 36/2 (April 1990):192.

judgment.³³ One possible way of averting the difficulty is to view this as a return only to remove the lampstand—i.e., the church and its testimony—and not as a return of Christ per se. Yet to ignore the consequences of Christ's advent for individual people, as this explanation does, is impossible in light of His clear statement.

Christ's coming is unconditional in 2:25 and 3:11, so it must be here too. A special grammatical feature of 2:5 makes it possible to interpret the coming the same in this case. Matthew 18:21b illustrates the construction of 2:5, one that accords with a Semitic model.³⁴ The literal rendering is, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and will I forgive him?" The sense of the verse is obvious: "How often, *when my brother sins against me*, will I forgive him?" Another illustration of parataxis with subordination is Luke 14:5b, whose literal rendering is, "A son or ox of which of you will fall into a pit, and will he not immediately snatch him up on the day of the Sabbath?" Rendered in a smoother English sense, this becomes, "Which of you having a son or an ox, *when he falls into a pit*, will not immediately snatch him up on the day of the Sabbath?" John 7:34a furnishes another example: the literal "Seek Me and you will not find Me" means "*When you seek Me*, you will not find Me." Again in John 10:12b, the literal is, "He beholds the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees," but the meaning is, "*When he beholds the wolf coming*, he leaves the sheep and flees." This type of construction is well established in the NT.

Applying the same principle in Rev 2:5b yields the following: the literal is, "But if you do not, I will come and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent," but the sense is, "If you do not, *when I come*, I will remove your lampstand, if you shall not have repented before that coming[, whenever it happens]."³⁵ This rendering does justice to the book's acknowledged emphasis on the imminence of Christ's return without conditioning it on the nonrepentance of the Ephesian church. The threat to this congregation lay in the possibility that He might come while they were alive and catch them in a state of nonrepentance. So they needed to comply immediately.

What is the threatened removal of the lampstand? Is it a special judgment in destroying the whole city and closing its harbor, as eventually happened to Ephesus?³⁶ This identification is problematic because the threat was to the church within the city and not to the whole city.

Another possibility is that the threat was the removal of the church's testimony, the symbolic meaning of a lampstand. A church can remain while its testimony disappears.³⁷ Without its first love, a church is without a testimony.³⁸

³³E.g., Caird, *Revelation* 32.

³⁴Nigel Turner, *Syntax*, vol. 3 of *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963) 342.

³⁵Sweet, *Revelation* 82; Beckwith, *Apocalypse* 450.

³⁶Cf. Smith, *Revelation* 64; Walvoord, *Revelation* 57-58.

³⁷Beasley-Murray, *Revelation* 75; Caird, *Revelation* 32.

That had in fact already happened in Ephesus, but this occurred without an act of divine judgment, so removal of the lampstand must be more than this.

The added dimension of judgment can come through the tribulation accompanying Christ's return. He will cast the unsaved remnant of the church into the end-time hour of trial at the same time He delivers the saved remnant into His own presence. After deliverance of the saved, the church on earth at Ephesus will be without a single person who has a genuine relationship to Christ. A loss of testimony—i.e., the removal of the lampstand—is inevitable in that situation. This potentiality offers the fullest and best explanation of what Christ meant by His threat to remove the lampstand of Ephesus from its place.

Pergamum (2:16)

The Lord speaks of His coming to judge Pergamum in 2:16: "Repent therefore; but if not, I will come to you soon, and will make war against them [i.e., those holding the teaching of the Nicolaitans] with the sword of My mouth." Repentance is the only reasonable response to an awareness of Christ's hatred for the teachings of Balaam and the Nicolaitans. The church in Pergamum was guilty of tolerating teachings that Christ could not, so it was urgent for them to repent.

Failure to do so would bring punishment, the same threat issued to the Ephesian church. Did this punishment come in the form of pestilence or physical calamity as it did to Balaam (Num 22:23, 31; 25:5; 31:8)? Obviously the Balaamites and the Nicolaitans are no more and have left no records or institutions behind them.³⁹ Some interpreters see the threat's consequences that way.

But such an understanding falls short of Revelation's emphasis on the second coming of Christ and the use of $\epsilon\chi\omicron\mu\alpha\iota$ (*erchomai*, "I will come") ADVANCE \R 2.15—the verb used here—to speak of that coming. The presence of the adverb $\tau\alpha\chi\epsilon\iota$ (*tachy*, "soon")—the soonness found also in 1:1 and 3:11 as discussed above—fuels the case for seeing a reference to Christ's imminent return. Christ's words, "[I] will make war against them with the sword of My mouth," are further evidence that this refers to His eschatological return to judge the wicked, not to a special coming to this church alone. That is the language of Rev 19:11-15, especially v. 15, which speaks of Christ's triumphant return to earth. Correspondence with that passage shows that this church will be on the wrong side at that final moment of truth, unless they repent.⁴⁰ For the first-century readers, "I will come" indicated Christ was talking about His second or final advent.⁴¹

The apparent problem with this meaning is the same as it is with the church in Ephesus, that of conditioning the return of Christ on the nonrepentance of the

³⁸Beckwith, *Apocalypse* 450.

³⁹Hailey, *Revelation* 133.

⁴⁰Charles, *Revelation* 1:65; Sweet, *Revelation* 90.

⁴¹Mounce, *Revelation* 99.

Pergamene church. Application of the explanation offered above in connection with the Ephesian message yields the following sense here: "Repent therefore; otherwise [i.e., if you shall not have repented beforehand], *when I come to you soon*, I will make war against them with sword of My mouth."

The thrust of *tachy* must be that of imminence, not swiftness. The latter notion makes little sense in conjunction with victory in battle, which is the terminology in 2:16. Swiftness of action is meaningful only in connection with a series of events. Christ's victory at His second advent to earth will not be a prolonged war.

The objects of the threatened judgment must include the whole church, because the call to repentance addresses them. The σοι (*soi*, "to you") earlier in v. 16 is singular, referring to the messenger from Pergamum. Since the messenger is representative of the church corporately, the whole church is culpable because of its tolerance of the Nicolaitan doctrine.⁴² The Balaamites and the Nicolaitans were guilty because of wrong doctrine, but the rest of the church because of its leniency in dealing with the promoters of that doctrine.

Sardis (3:3)

In 3:3, Christ admonishes the church at Sardis, "Remember therefore how you have received and heard, and keep [strengthening what remains], and repent. If therefore you do not watch, I will come as a thief, and you will in no way know what hour I will come upon you." Two "therefores" (ο ἐπὶ \O(=,y)η, *oun*) divide the verse into two parts, the first half being a gracious call to solve the church's problem of stagnancy and the second a threat predicated on an assumption that the church will not accept the remedy.

The remedy consisted of a motivation kindled by focusing on their spiritual heritage from the past, earnest attention to strengthening their leftover vitality, and repentance over and turning away from their spiritual lethargy. In some respects, their plight resembled that of the church at Ephesus (cf. 2:5). They needed to recall their former outlook and achievements and do an immediate about-face in order to return to that condition.

Their probable failure to do so, however, would bring on the dreaded prospects of Christ's return. Their refusal to "watch" or "wake up"⁴³ from their spiritual sleep of death (cf. 3:2) exposed them to the possible surprise coming of the Lord during their lifetime. Their present evil state was so hopeless that the speaker held little anticipation that they would turn back.⁴⁴

In this instance the verb speaking of Christ's coming is ἐρχομαι (h eq \O(h) jv (*h eq \O(~,e)x eq \O(~,o)*, "I will come), the same verb and spelling as the word used in

⁴²Beckwith, *Apocalypse* 460.

⁴³Robertson correctly calls γρηγορήσω (*gregoresōs*, "you wake up") an ingressive aorist (*Word Pictures* 6:314).

⁴⁴Alford, *Greek Testament* 4:580.

2:25 for His coming, though the sentence structure requires understanding a future indicative here as compared with an aorist subjunctive there.⁴⁵ Two interpretations of the nature of this coming align with the two ways commentators have identified the coming to judge the Ephesian church. Though they acknowledge that coming as a thief usually applies to Christ's second advent, one group sees here a partial and special advent for judgment of a single church.⁴⁶ In support of this approach, Beasley-Murray cites Rev 3:20 as another case where parousia language refers to the present experience of Christians.⁴⁷ Discussion above, however, has clarified why 3:20 speaks primarily of the second advent, not of present Christian experience.

A further weakness in taking 3:3 to be a special coming is the lack of any particular consequences if this were Christ's coming to a single church. The other two possible references to special comings—2:5, 16ADVANCE \R 2.15—give the results of removal of a lampstand and warfare with the sword of Christ's mouth. The speaker gives no such eventuality here, however.

The implied effect is punishment for disloyalty at the second coming, a factor that supports a second way to understand the coming in 3:3. Apparently the major sin at Sardis was inattention to the Lord's return.⁴⁸ The simile of coming as a thief finds exclusive use elsewhere in the NT in reference to Christ's second advent (cf. Matt 24:43; Luke 12:39; 1 Thess 5:2; 2 Pet 3:10; Rev 16:15).⁴⁹ Four other NT writers use the figure this way: Matthew, Luke, Paul, and Peter. The threat in Rev 3:3 is closest to Paul's instruction to Thessalonica when he predicts the coming of the day of the Lord as a thief upon those unprepared for His coming.⁵⁰ The urgent call for repentance in Revelation 2–3 arises from the prospect of an imminent end.⁵¹ "Coming-as-a-thief" terminology was the language of Jesus Himself in instructing the twelve to watch for His return.⁵² John shared the prevailing belief of the early church that Christ would return imminently.⁵³ The Sardians in particular needed to heed the possible negative outcome of that return by reversing their lethargic posture.

⁴⁵The spelling of the future active indicative, first person singular, is the same as the aorist active subjunctive, first person singular, for this verb.

⁴⁶E.g., Alford, *Greek Testament* 4:581; Lee, "Revelation" 4:537; Beasley-Murray, *Revelation* 97.

⁴⁷Beasley-Murray, *Revelation* 97.

⁴⁸Trench, *Seven Churches* 170-71; Charles, *Revelation* 1:81; Robert Govett, *The Apocalypse Expounded by Scripture* (London: Charles J. Thynne, 1920) 67.

⁴⁹Beckwith, *Apocalypse* 474; Robertson, *Word Pictures* 6:314.

⁵⁰Bullinger, *Apocalypse* 192-94.

⁵¹Behm, "νοῦν, νοῦν, etc.," in *TDNT* 4:1004.

⁵²Charles, *Revelation* 1:79.

⁵³Caird, *Revelation* 49.

Regarding this threat as they do others (2:5, 16, 22), some object to seeing an eschatological coming of Christ because Christ conditions the coming on nonrepentance in one city.⁵⁴ The objection is formidable, but not insurmountable. Following the pattern of the two earlier threats to Ephesus and Pergamum, the sense of 3:3b is, "If you do not wake up, *when I shall come as a thief*, you will in no way know at what hour I will come to you." The timing is not dependent on one city's response.

The timing of Christ's return depends solely on the Father's determination (Acts 1:7). But from man's perspective, the NT anticipates the alignment of three prerequisites for that return to occur. One is the national repentance of Israel (Acts 3:19-21). That repentance and Christ's return to earth will follow shortly after the meeting of another condition, the completion of the body of Christ (Rom 11:25-26).

The third human factor determinative of the second advent's timing relates to the remaining segment of humanity, the Gentiles (cf. 1 Cor 10:32). The degeneracy of the Gentile world will reach a point that God can no longer tolerate, as occurred in the days of Noah (Gen 6:3, 5-7). One measure of Gentile degeneracy is the worsening moral condition of the professing Christian church as it inevitably absorbs the influence of its surrounding culture. Sleeping Sardian church people reflect the developing moral failure of their home city and the world as a whole. Indifference to God will eventually reach a point that Christ will return for judgment, a judgment that will have the unrepentant at Sardis as its object too.

The Lord reinforces His lesson on unexpectedness in the last words of 3:3: "you will in no way know what hour I will come upon you." No one can pinpoint the time of His return, so it will catch everyone by surprise. The citizens of Sardis whose topological situation presumably rendered the city impregnable to enemy attacks realized well what it meant to fall victim to a surprise attack. Twice in the city's history opponents had captured the city while inhabitants were complacent in dependence on their supposed invincibility. By their spiritual lethargy, Sardian "Christians" had made Christ their enemy and were now in danger of falling victim to His surprise coming. John uses the same figure of a thief in 16:15 to reiterate a truth he had heard Christ teach at least twice many years before (Matt 24:42-43; Luke 12:39). This time, however, its application was to a people who had ignored His earlier lessons on watchfulness.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE `COMINGS' FOR THE TIME OF THE RAPTURE

An investigation of the `comings' of Christ in Revelation 2-3 has shown them to be of two types, one a coming for deliverance and the other a coming for judgment. The common feature of the two is that both `comings' are imminent. They could occur at any moment to implement the anticipated results for the designated objects.

⁵⁴E.g., Caird, *Revelation* 49; George E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 57; Leon Morris, *The Revelation of St. John*, TNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 76; Mounce, *Revelation* 111.

The only way that both `comings' can be imminent is for them to occur simultaneously. If either one preceded the other, the second would not be impending because occurrence of the other would have to come first, furnishing a forewarning of the second. The necessity of such a precursor would remove the latter `coming' from the category of imminency.

If the coming of Christ to impose the punishments of Daniel's seventieth week⁵⁵ on the disloyal were to precede His coming to deliver the faithful, He could not have characterized His coming for deliverance as being "soon." Another predicted event had to happen before that deliverance, so it would not have been impending.

Conversely, if the coming of Christ to provide deliverance were to precede His coming to impose punishments, He could not have described His coming to chastise as being "soon." In this case, His retributive coming would not have been imminent, but He says it is impending at least three times in these seven messages.

That means that Christ allowed for no time between His coming to catch away the church to be with Himself and the beginning of Daniel's seventieth week. To postulate a period between the rapture of the church and the seventieth week, during which ten nations must unite,⁵⁶ during which will occur the regathering of Israel, the emergence of a great world ruler, rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, and a covenant of peace with Israel,⁵⁷ or during which some other events must happen, runs counter to the joint imminence of these two future happenings. Exegetical conclusions must override whatever theological necessities *seem* to demand. Examinations of passages relevant to the `comings' of Christ in Revelation 2-3 have dictated that the two come simultaneously.

Ryrie's opinion is that the Scriptures are noncommittal regarding the issue of whether or not there is a time gap between the rapture and the seventieth week:

Though I believe that the Rapture precedes the beginning of the Tribulation, actually nothing is said in the Scriptures as to whether or not some time (or

⁵⁵For an analysis to demonstrate that the plagues of Revelation 4 ff. are events of Daniel's seventieth week, see John A. McLean, "The Seventieth Week of Daniel 9:27 as a Literary Key for Understanding the Structure of the Apocalypse of John" (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1990).

⁵⁶Cf. John F. Walvoord, *The Prophecy Knowledge Handbook* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1990) 485; cf. *ibid.*, 487, where Walvoord writes, "The ten-nation kingdom must be formed in the final seven years before the Second Coming." The diagram of the day of the Lord on 485 clarifies what he apparently intends by this statement: the day of the Lord begins simultaneously with the rapture, but includes an undefined period after the rapture and before Daniel's seventieth week during which the forming of the ten-nation kingdom will occur. See also his statement, "The time period [i.e., the day of the Lord] begins at the rapture, but major events do not come immediately. However, if the DOL has progressed very far, there will be unmistakable signs that they are in the DOL" (*ibid.*, 492).

⁵⁷Cf. Renald E. Showers, *Maranatha, Our Lord Come!* (Bellmawr, N. J.: The Friends of Israel, 1995) 61. Showers, unlike Walvoord (see n. 55), sees the day of the Lord and the seventieth week beginning simultaneously (*ibid.*, 63), but has the rapture occurring at an earlier time because it is not part of the day of the Lord (*ibid.*, 59).

how much time) may elapse between the Rapture and the beginning of the Tribulation.⁵⁸

Exegetical results of this study indicate otherwise, however. For both deliverance and judgement to be imminent, the rapture of the church must be simultaneous with the beginning of Daniel's seventieth week.⁵⁹

⁵⁸Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1986) 465. In essence Grant R. Jeffrey agrees with Ryrie on this issue: "There may be an interval of time, however small, between the Rapture and the signing of the seven-year treaty with Israel. Whether this interval occupies a few days, months or years, it must be short because God will not leave the earth without a witness to His truth" (*Apocalypse, the Coming Judgment of the Nations* [Toronto: Frontier Research, 1992] 125).

⁵⁹Jeffrey L. Townsend concurs in his comments on Rev 3:10: "Both the coming of the hour [of testing] and the coming of the Lord are imminent. . . . There will be preservation outside the imminent hour of testing for the Philadelphian church when the Lord comes" ("The Rapture in Revelation 3:10," *When the Trumpet Sounds*, eds. Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy [Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House, 1995] 377).

INDIRECT REFERENCES TO CHRIST'S 'COMINGS'

Consideration of indirect references to Christ's return in the seven messages will throw further light on the timing of the 'comings.' The three less direct references to Christ's coming are, in the order of discussion, 3:10, 2:22, and 3:16.

The Hour of Trial, 3:10

Pretribulationists have often cited Revelation 3:10 as one of the strongest evidences for Christ's coming to remove the church before Daniel's seventieth week, and rightly so: "because you have kept the word of My endurance, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is about to come upon the whole inhabited earth, to try those who dwell upon the earth."

Yet the verse does not explicitly speak of the rapture so much as it tells of the church's preservation at a location away from the scene of earthly tribulation during that period.⁶⁰ Though it contains no explicit reference to the church's removal from the earth, the inevitable conclusion is that the only way all members of the body of Christ, of which the Philadelphian church is representative, can receive that protection from the scene of plagues detailed later in Revelation is to experience that deliverance prior to the beginning of those plagues.

The passage *does* refer to a coming of Christ in an indirect way, however, His coming to inflict wrath on a rebellious world. The Lord tells of "the hour of trial that is about to come upon the whole inhabited earth, to try those who dwell upon the earth." Christ's word in Rev 16:15 to *all* the churches—not just to a single church—is that His coming is a coming in judgment: "Behold I come as a thief. Blessed is the one who watches and keeps his garments, that he not walk naked and they see his shame." This "beatitude" carries overtones of His warnings to Sardis and Laodicea (3:3, 18) in that failure to watch and keep one's garments will result in unparalleled misery and utter hopelessness for those who find themselves objects of the seven last plagues. If the coming of Christ is a coming to inflict temporal wrath as the previous discussion has outlined, the coming of that "hour of trial" is identical with the judgmental coming of Christ.

Common agreement identifies "the hour of trial" with the period of seals, trumpets, and bowls delineated in Revelation 4:1–22:5. This is not merely a local time of troubling the community at Philadelphia. It will encompass "the whole inhabited earth" (τὴν ὅλην τὴν γῆν) and will have as its objects "those who dwell upon the earth," an expression that throughout Revelation refers to earthlings in rebellion against God.⁶¹ Moffatt calls the period the "broken days which in eschatological schemes was to herald the Messiah's return."⁶² It is a time of distress

⁶⁰Thomas, 1—7283-88.

⁶¹Hort, *Apocalypse* 35; Ladd, *Revelation* 62; Johnson, "Revelation" 12:454. Cf. Rev 6:10; 8:13; 11:10 [twice]; 13:8, 12, 14 [twice]; 17:2, 8.

⁶²Moffatt, "Revelation" 5:368.

in the world before the coming of Christ, a period variously known as the day of the Lord, the tribulation, or the great tribulation, in part (cf. Dan 12:1; Joel 2:31; Mark 13:14; 2 Thess 2:1-12; Rev 7:14; 14:7). The divine purpose behind the trials of this period is to test the wicked, either to lead them to repentance or to punish them for failing to repent.⁶³

The deliverance promised to the Philadelphian church pertained not only to their immediate Jewish persecutors, but also to the heathen world in general. The period of tribulation will immediately precede the coming of the Lord to the earth (cf. Matt 24:29-30). Since the generation of Christians to whom Jesus originally addressed these words has now passed from the earthly scene, Philadelphia must represent not only the other six churches of Asia but also the body of Christ worldwide throughout the present age.⁶⁴

The important *ἡ ὥρα* (*hōra*, "hour") in Rev 3:3 (*ἡ ὥρα ἐγγύς ἐστιν*, "the hour is near") fixes the timing of this hour's arrival. It was an hour that was getting closer every moment, one that could begin at any moment.⁶⁵ The term relates closely to the words of Rev 1:1, *ἡ ὥρα ἐγγύς ἐστιν* (*hōra ēγγύς ἐστιν*, "the hour is near"), and to *ἔρχομαι ταχὺ* (*erchomai tachy*, "I will come soon") in 2:16 and 3:11. Christ's coming to impose trials on a rebellious world is impending just as is His coming to accomplish deliverance for the faithful.

The context of Rev 3:10 is further verification of the imminent nature of these two happenings. His immediately ensuing word to this church in 3:11—"I will come soon"—is implicit evidence that His coming to deliver will coincide with His coming to judge.

Great Tribulation, 2:22

A second indirect reference to Christ's coming appears in 2:22: "Behold, I am casting her into a bed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, if they do not repent of her works." The leading offender in this context is Jezebel who "teaches and deceives My slaves to commit fornication and to eat things sacrificed to idols" (2:20) and who has refused her divinely permitted opportunity to repent (2:21).

Christ predicts that He will cast her into a bed because of her nonrepentance. Though suggested meanings of the bed have varied from hell to a sickbed to physical death, the higher probability is that it is figurative language for the period of eschatological tribulation described after chapter 4 of this book. Similar anticipations extended to the churches at Ephesus (2:5) and Pergamum (2:16) provide some of the rationale for this understanding as does a later word to

⁶³Alford, *Greek Testament* 4:586; Beckwith, *Apocalypse* 483; Johnson, "Revelation" 12:454.

⁶⁴Smith, *Revelation* 88.

⁶⁵Swete, *Apocalypse* 55; Walter Scott, *Exposition of the Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Swengel, Pa.: Bible Truth Depot, n.d.) 105; Townsend, "The Rapture in Revelation 3:10" 377.

this same church about the Lord's eschatological coming to deliver the faithful (2:25). The strongest support for referring the bed to eschatological trials prior to Christ's return to earth comes in its paralleling with *thlipsin megalē* ("great tribulation") in 2:22, an expression referring to eschatological trials in 7:14.

"Great tribulation" is the promised destiny of Jezebel's followers, so it is probable that her fate will be the same. "Tribulation" (*thlipsis*) is sometimes a general word for a severe judgment of suffering,⁶⁶ but several considerations make probable its reference to eschatological tribulation. The adjective "great" suggests a reference to the tribulation of the last days.⁶⁷ The use of the same expression in 7:14 to refer to the period immediately preceding the second advent is further indication of this meaning.⁶⁸ Jesus' use of identical phraseology in Matt 24:21 to depict that future period provides further reason for believing this to designate part of "the hour of trial" spoken of in the Philadelphian message. After all, the encouragement to the faithful in 2:25 comes from contemplating Christ's imminent coming for deliverance; why should not the threat to the unfaithful draw upon His related coming to judge the wicked? In view of the detailed description of this period in the main body of the Apocalypse (Rev 4:1–22:5), it is sound to conclude that the threat to unrepentant Jezebel's followers (and Jezebel) was that of having to experience the horrors of eschatological great tribulation.

So in a slightly different manner, motivation stemming from an imminent danger to the unfaithful in Thyatira accompanies the incentive of an imminent deliverance for the faithful, just as is in the message to Philadelphia. Does this same combination appear in the message to Laodicea?

Regurgitation, 3:16

To the Laodicean church, Christ communicates in part as follows: "Thus, because you are lukewarm and neither hot nor cold, I am about to spew you out of My mouth" (3:16). The metaphor of lukewarmness derives from the water supply to this city. Unlike neighboring Hierapolis which had hot, spring water, valuable for medicinal purposes, and neighboring Colosse which had cool, refreshing-to-the-taste water, Laodicea had tepid water that was sickening to drink on either a hot or a cold day.⁶⁹ This figure expresses the revulsion of Christ over the church's spiritual state.

The church people were not just spiritually immature or complacent.⁷⁰

⁶⁶Beckwith, *Apocalypse* 467; Moffatt, "Revelation" 5:361.

⁶⁷Sweet, *Revelation* 95.

⁶⁸Smith, *Revelation* 77. The absence of the articles here and their presence in 7:14 is explainable on the basis of 2:22 being the first mention of the period in the book (Robertson, *Word Pictures* 6:310).

⁶⁹William R. Newell, *The Book of Revelation* (Chicago: Moody, 1935) 76.

⁷⁰Contra Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of John* (London: Macmillan, 1906) 60; R. C. H.

Neither was their problem just that of having some interest in the things of God, but falling short of the true testimony of Christ.⁷¹ Their plight was far worse. Lukewarm describes those who have professed Christ hypocritically and whose actions betray that their hearts are not in what they pretend to be.⁷² Christ's description of them in 3:15-16 markedly resembles His denunciation of the religious authorities of His day for their hypocrisy (e.g., Matt 23:13-36). A nominal Christian who cannot see his need for repentance is a hopeless case.⁷³ The five adjectives describing this church in 3:17 make clear that, as a general rule, those in the church had no relationship with Christ as Savior.⁷⁴ Though a few among them may have been genuine in their faith, the influence of the few in the church was insignificant. That resembles the situation in Sardis.

Christ's reaction toward the sad condition corresponds to their disgusting spiritual condition. "Spew you out of My mouth" is a most contemptuous expression, one that Christ uses nowhere else.⁷⁵ "Thus" which begins v. 16 reflects the correspondence between the church's condition and the drastic response, a response that conforms to those against churches with similar problems (cf. 2:5, 16, 22; 3:3): "I am about to [m eq \O(3,e)]lv, *mell eq \O(~,o)* spew you out of My mouth." As in 3:10, the verb m eq \O(3,e)]lv (*mell eq \O(~,o)*, "I am about to") indicates the wrath that is about to come on this church. The spewing out is not an immediate and special judgment to come on this church alone. It is a warning of the coming eschatological wrath on all the churches and the rest of the world with them.⁷⁶ This by design should have awakened recipients to the impending danger,⁷⁷ as the corresponding promise of deliverance from the same peril provided comfort to the church in Philadelphia (3:10).⁷⁸

In light of this understanding of 3:16, one looks for an encouraging word to the faithful in Laodicea, such as the messages to Philadelphia and Thyatira have illustrated. This comes in 3:20 where Christ promises the richness of eschatological fellowship at the marriage supper of the Lamb to the one who responds to His knock. The existence of a faithful remnant in Laodicea is not as explicit as in the

Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Revelation* (Columbus, Ohio: Lutheran Book Concern, 1935) 154.

⁷¹Contra Trench, *Seven Churches*, 260; William Kelly, *The Revelation* (London: Thomas Weston, 1904) 83.

⁷²Barnes, *Revelation* 1570; Walvoord, *Revelation* 92.

⁷³Moffatt, "Revelation" 5:371.

⁷⁴Johnson, "Revelation" 12:458.

⁷⁵Swete, *Apocalypse* 60; Kelly, *Revelation* 84; Smith, *Revelation* 122.

⁷⁶Charles, *Revelation* 1:96.

⁷⁷Trench, *Seven Churches* 263; Beckwith, *Apocalypse* 490; Lenski, *Revelation* 151.

⁷⁸Scott, *Revelation* 112.

other two messages, but the assumption of positive respondents to the invitation of 3:20 strongly implies this.

Overviews of 3:10, 2:22, and 3:16, therefore, provide confirmation of the dual imminence of the coming day of the Lord's wrath with the coming day of deliverance for His church.

OTHER NT INDICATIONS OF DUAL IMMINECE

A brief survey of a few other NT indications of this dual imminence is instructive. That combination begins as early as the teachings of the Lord Jesus during Passion Week. On Tuesday of that week in A.D. 30, His Olivet Discourse warned about the miseries to come upon Israel during her seventieth week. He compared the coming of the period to the surprise arrival of a thief in the night (Matt 24:43). On Thursday of the same week in His Upper Room discourse, He encouraged His own by predicting His return to take them to the Father's house (John 14:2-3). The immediate context, verb tense, and verbal idea of *erchomai* (*erchomai*, "I will come") convey the notion of imminence in the latter case: "I am on My way and may arrive at any moment."

Seventeen or eighteen years later, James wrote about the dual imminence in his epistle. In addressing the abusers of the poor, he noted "the miseries that are coming upon you" (5:1). Already on their way, they could arrive at any time, because the rich were already in "the last days" (5:3) when God would right the wrongs they have inflicted. Immediately after his words to the rich (5:1-6), James turns to offer incentives for the faithful to exhibit longsuffering (5:7-11). Their incentives lay in the nearness of the Lord's coming (5:8) and in His presence before the door, ready to enter and rectify past injustices (5:9).

About four years later, Paul wrote his two epistles to the Thessalonians, in the first of which he outlined the sequence of Christ's imminent coming for the dead in Christ and then for the living in Christ (4:13-18). This meant comfort to the saints. In conjunction with this coming, he told of the surprise arrival of the day of the Lord in terms of an unexpected visit by a thief in the night (5:2). The Lord will initiate the wrathful phase of that day (cf. 5:9) at the same moment He takes those in Christ to heaven. This will mean sudden destruction for those outside of Christ.

A few months later, Paul wrote to the same church and in one breath spoke of the translation of the church ADVANCE \R 2.15—"our gathering together to Him" in 2:1—and in the next breath, of how the church would have recognized the day of the Lord if it had already arrived ADVANCE \R 2.15—through the presence of "the apostasy" and the revelation of "the man of lawlessness" in 2:3. Some person or persons had misled them into thinking that the day of the Lord could have already begun without the translation of the church occurring simultaneously. He wrote to correct this error and to assure them the two happenings will occur together.

After another sixteen or seventeen years, Peter wrote his second epistle to the area that is now north-central Asia Minor. He reported the skepticism of those who were unconvinced that the Lord would return (3:3-4). Among other emphases, he focused on the fond hope of the faithful as they await and even

hasten the coming of "the day of God" and the arrival of the new heavens and new earth in which dwells righteousness (3:12-13). The arrival of that day will have grievous implications for those who miss their opportunity to repent, however, because "the day of the Lord will come as a thief," ultimately bringing about the destruction of the elements and the disappearance of the earth and its works (3:10). Peter anticipated final results in the prolonged day of the Lord, both for the righteous and for the unrighteous. It is the beginning of that day that is imminent, followed by developing conditions within the day leading to conditions of the eternal state. Herein lies the motivation for the mockers to repent and the faithful to persevere.

The above brief sampling of NT teaching regarding the imminence of both the wrathful seventieth week of Daniel 9 and the translation of the body of Christ to heaven parallels the same double imminence that is so conspicuous in Revelation 2-3 in A.D. 95. The Apocalypse climaxes this line of teaching that persisted throughout the period from Christ's personal ministry to the culmination of the NT canon.

A VINDICATION OF PRETRIBULATIONALISM

If two happenings are imminent, the only possible conclusion must be that they will be concurrent. Earlier discussion of the six direct references to Christ's coming in the seven messages to the churches of Asia has shown both Christ's return for the faithful and the beginning of Daniel's seventieth week to be imminent. That characteristic has received confirmation through a consideration of three indirect references to His coming in Revelation 2-3. The teachings of Christ in the gospels and several other NT portions have added their voice to the dual imminency of the two events. The return and the week's beginning must therefore occur at the same time.

Several times I have had a responsibility to plan programs for theological societies and conferences. I designated a time and place for each speaker, so everyone had to be ready and appear at the time I designated for him. Suppose I had, in a moment of derangement, decided to tell no one in advance the time for his part, but instructed all to be prepared to speak when called upon. Only I would know who was going to fulfill his role when. That would be poor planning on my part, but until I called for the first paper, every participant would be on his toes because his paper would be potentially imminent, i.e., due to be delivered at any moment. If a person knows his assignment would not come till the second day, he would not have to be ready the first day because he has an extra day to prepare. As planner, I would be aware of this difference in stages of readiness and would not expect everyone be be ready the first day. But if I kept everyone in the dark about when to speak, I would be the only one for whom each part would not be imminent, since I would know the sequence in advance.

In a manner of speaking, God is a program planner. In planning His program, He has chosen not to disclose times for future events. He has indicated, however, that some events will occur before others. For example, the millennial kingdom will come before the white-throne judgment, or the second coming of

Christ will precede the battle of Armageddon, or the seventieth week of Daniel will precede the millennial kingdom. Yet He has indicated no sequence for two events, the rapture of the church and the beginning of Daniel's seventieth week. He has given His word that the two are imminent, that both may come at any moment.

Unlike human planners who cannot schedule simultaneous parts on the same program unless they are in separate rooms, God has indicated that no prophecy remains to be fulfilled before either of these events. If it were to turn out that one of the two preceded the other, God has not been forthright with people. It questions His ethics to suggest that one of the two is not imminent if, in fact, that is the case. Would He misinform readers of Scripture by asking them to be ready for two happenings that could occur at any moment, when actually one of them will precede the other? Of course not! God cannot lie (Tit 1:2).

The Bible presents no sequential arrangement of these two events as it does for other future happenings. It prophesies nothing that must occur before these two, including nothing to indicate that one of the two must occur before the other. They are both next items on God's prophetic calendar. This can only find fulfillment if the two occur at the same time. Were either to come before the other, the biblical account would have been misleading in that the second would not have been imminent until the first occurred.

God, the master planner, is the only one for whom the two events are not imminent because He knows precisely when they will happen. With that knowledge, He has instructed us to expect them both at any moment. Surely He would not mislead people into expecting both to be imminent if one of the two is not.

The `comings' of Christ in Revelation 2-3 necessitate that both the church's rapture and the beginning of Daniel's seventieth week be imminent and hence occur simultaneously. Exegetical analyses of the nine references to these `comings' require contemporaneousness. That is why I differ with those who say exegetical proof for the pretribulational rapture does not exist. Clear exegetical evidence for the imminence of two future happenings requires a pretribulational rapture. Two events will come at once, one of which is the translation of the church. The only way this can happen is for the church to enter the Father's house not before, not after, but at the moment the hour of trial begins.

Dual imminency of Daniel's seventieth week and the church's deliverance from the wrath of that week is not the only exegetical proof of the pretribulational rapture of the church, but it deserves its place alongside other evidence because of its prominence in Revelation 2-3.