Coming on the Clouds of Heaven:
An Investigation into the Nature of Our Lord’s Return in Contrast with the
Doctrine of the Rapture

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According to one popular novel, the return of Jesus Christ will be evident by millions disappearing—leaving nothing but their clothes—in a blink of an eye.\(^1\) This is a far cry from the vision of Christ’s return in Revelation 19, with Christ upon a white horse initiating a great slaughter of God’s enemies. But the reason for the difference in these accounts is not that the former ignores the latter, but the contention that the NT itself bifurcates Christ second coming into two events. First, at some point Christ will come to take His people to heaven, they will meet Him in the clouds; this doctrine is often called the rapture. Second, Christ will come again once more to deal judgment against those who have rejected Him and institute a 1,000 year earthly kingdom. This doctrine is not merely the fantasy of Christian novelists: it has the weight of many seasoned and well known scholars behind it. Some of the most well-known schools in America, notably Dallas Theological Seminary, propound this doctrine. I also once believed this to be true.

Yet, my contention in this paper is that this is, in fact, a misreading of the New Testament Scriptures. I will argue the Bible teaches Christ will return only once more, for salvation to those who are awaiting and judgment against those who are rejecting Him. Furthermore, the NT teaches that Jesus’ return has been at the threshold—immanent—for 2 millennia and remains so today: He will come quickly—suddenly!—and visibly, then will come the end of this creation.

To show this, we will look at Matthew 24 and the way Paul addresses Christ’s Return in 1 & 2 Thessalonians. We will then look at the other NT Scriptures and the way they describe Christ’s return.\(^2\)

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\(^1\) *Left Behind*, by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins.

\(^2\) Though the Old Testament speaks of the coming of the Messiah and a great final judgment—the Day of the Lord—the Prophets collapse these together. The saving acts of Jesus Christ are described in union with the final judgments and institution of His Kingdom on earth: it is in the NT that we see clearly the Christ came and will return. If Christ will return twice more, the evidence will come from the NT.
Christ’s Return in Matthew 24 and 1 & 2 Thessalonians

Matthew 24

Matthew 24 and its parallels in the other gospels has engendered no small amount of interpretive controversy, but it is the best place for us to begin, for Jesus words here undergird the rest of the NT authors’ understanding of His return. Much of Jesus words in this chapter are actually intended as a corrective to the disciples’ misunderstanding of the end of the age: as the chapter opens, the disciples’ response to Jesus’ pronouncement of judgment against the temple (24:1-2) is to conflate this judgment with the end of the age and Christ’s return in glory (24:3). They ask Him, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?” That is, they ask when the Temple will fall and in connection with this, what will signal His triumphant return. The sermon with which Jesus responds does not answer their questions on their terms: Jesus answers both questions, but deliberately separates His coming from the fall of the temple. His response, in effect, is that Jerusalem will fall soon, after many troubling signs, yet His return will follow these things—later, at an indeterminate time. He instructs them not to jump the gun when they see the destruction of Jerusalem, but to wait for the incontrovertible sign of His return—Him coming in glory (“on the clouds”) for all to see.

The first part of his sermon, Chapter 24, splits into three sections (vv. 4-14; 15-31; 32-51). First, in vv. 4-14, Jesus warns His disciples not to be led astray or alarmed by the terrible things that will shortly happen—wars, false teachers, and persecution. These, Jesus says, are not


4 Unless stated otherwise, all Scripture quotations are taken from the ESV.

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signals of His return (4) but only foretastes of the horrors surrounding the temple’s destruction (8). Verse 14a, “and this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world,” could be understood as a precursor to the fall of the temple, fulfilled by the Gospel’s spread beyond Rome by A.D. 70. This is compatible with the usual sense of the word here translated “world” (οἰκουμενή, oikoumenē), but the transition begun in v. 13 and the statement that the end will coming after these things (14b) suggests a transition from the immanent judgment to the end times: you will suffer all these things, afterwards the gospel will spread to all nations, “and then the end will come.”5 This is paralleled by the transition to Christ’s return that follows references to AD 70 in the next section (vv. 27-28, 30-31). Jesus, therefore, begins his sermon by warning the disciples not to be led astray when they experience the coming calamities: these are not signs of His coming but things that must happen sometime before it.

In verses 15-30, Jesus then connects these initial “birth pains” (v. 8) with their culmination in the destruction of the temple. Because of what he has said—that horrors are coming but they are not His return—they should flee when they see the beginnings of Jerusalem’s judgment—they should not expect to be snatched out of it! Though most commentators identify this discourse with the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, those who believe in a future 7 year tribulation often correlate that time with Jesus words here; so we should establish that this does indeed refer to AD 70.6 Gentry and Wellum have argued compelling for a reading

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5 Emphasis added.

of Daniel’s vision of 70 weeks (Dan. 9:24-27) that identifies the final week as the sabbatical in which Jesus was crucified.\(^7\)

Essentially, the prophecy is divided into three sections (7 Weeks, 62 weeks, 1 Week): the rebuilding of the temple took place in the first 7, then there were 62 weeks until the time of the Messiah, it was during the last week (AD 27-34) that Jesus was cut off of “not for himself.”\(^8\) If their argument is cogent, then the final week does not refer to an awaited eschatological period but the time in which Jesus ministered and was crucified, and in which Jerusalem was destroyed. They interpret the last part of Daniel’s prophecy in this way: “And after the sixty two sevens, an Anointed One will be cut off, but not for himself, and the people of the coming Leader will ruin/spoil the city and the sanctuary, and its end will come with the flood. And until the end war—desolations are what is decided.”\(^9\) For verse 27, their literal translation is a little bit difficult, but we could smooth it out in this way, “And he will uphold a covenant with the many for one seven, and halfway through this seven he will cause sacrifice and offering to cease, and there will be one who brings desolation with extreme abominations, until the end and what has been decreed is poured out on that which is being desolated.”\(^10\)

Their argument is, essentially, that the Anointed leader is the Messiah, Jesus, who will be killed for His people. Yet His very people, the Jews, will ruin both Jerusalem and the temple with horrible desolations, until the city is utterly destroyed—what has been decreed is fully


\(^8\) The Hebrew text is better translated “and not for himself” instead of “and he will have nothing.” Ibid., 549.

\(^9\) Ibid., 537.

\(^10\) Cf. Ibid.
poured out.\textsuperscript{11} The Anointed leader will, through his death, cause sacrifice and offering to cease and uphold a covenant with many (cf. Isaiah 53 for the language of “the many”). Read in this way, the abomination here associated with desolation is not the same as the actions of Antiochus Epiphanes (Dan. 11:31, 12:11), though the prophecies concerning Antiochus probably anticipate this climactic abomination. That the Messiah’s own people cause such an abomination fits with the events of AD 70: Josephus provides evidence that the Jews are to blame for bringing the Roman destruction down upon themselves, they cause the desolation in this sense, and the atrocities they committed within the Temple during this time surely qualify as an abominable desolation.\textsuperscript{12}

Thus, the abomination of desolation Jesus speaks of in Matthew 24:15 is the events of these verses in Daniel, speaking of the end of Jerusalem and the Temple. Those who witness this event should flee, for these events herald horrible tribulations. Yet, Jesus is emphatic that this time will not be His coming: there will be those who claim that they are the Christ or perform wonders claiming that the Messiah has come, but Jesus’ coming will be different: He will come in such a way that all will see Him—like vultures clearly signal the presence of a corpse (27-28).\textsuperscript{13}

To this point, everything that Jesus has described has anticipated a great calamity, but He has yet to address it directly. He does so in verse 29. Using the apocalyptic imagery the Prophets

\textsuperscript{11} Gentry and Wellum note that the text does not require the desolation and destruction to happen within the week of the Anointed Leader’s death, but in association with it. Ibid., 553.


\textsuperscript{13} This is a difficult verse, but it seems that, in connection with the Parousia, it indicates the visible and incontrovertible nature of Christ’s return: the sign clearly points to what is signified. The morbidity of the picture chosen may be fitting imagery for the purpose of Christ’s return, part of which is judgment. France, \textit{The Gospel of Matthew}, 921. Contra F. F. Bruce, \textit{The Hard Sayings of Jesus}, The Jesus Library (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1983), 231–232.
employed to describe the falls of the great enemies of God’s people—Assyria, Egypt, Babylon, etc.—Jesus says that “Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.” This is not to be taken literally, but suggests tremendous calamity and, specifically, the destruction of a great city or nation, especially one in rebellion against God (Cf. Isa. 13:10; Ezk. 32:7; Joel 2:10; Amos 8:9). Jesus then once again returns to the topic of His coming: “Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man” (Matt. 24:31). Jesus emphasizes once more that His coming will not be seen in the destruction of Jerusalem, but will follow at some time afterwards. The phrase “sign of the Son of Man” is probably best interpreted as a genitive of apposition, the sign which is the Son of Man. Three reasons for this are, first, that no sign is given in context; second, that Jesus’ coming in v. 27 is contrasted with the signs of the false prophets (24); third, that the parallel passages exclude the word “sign” and only speak of His return (Mark 13:26; Luke 21:27). So, in this second part of His sermon in Matthew 24, Jesus again distinguishes the cataclysmic end of Jerusalem which His disciples had conflated with the end of the age from His subsequent return and the end, which would happen at that time.

The last section of this sermon confirms our interpretation so far. In verses 32-51, Jesus summarizes that the destruction of Jerusalem—“all these things”—will come soon, before this generation passes away, and that after this, His coming will be imminent yet indeterminate. The parable of the fig tree in verses 32-35 summarizes this by using the illustration of a tree: when the leaves appear, you know to expect the fruit soon. When the temple is destroyed, says Jesus—

which will happen very soon (34)—then “you know that he is near, at the very gate” (33). In the following verses, Jesus makes it clear, though His coming is imminent after the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, its actual arrival is unknown to all but the Father (36). It will be sudden, and unexpected (37-41). Thus far, Jesus has emphasized to His disciples the need to stay on guard, not to be led astray by doomsday prophesiers who will cry the end before Christ is clearly revealed in His coming: He concludes the sermon by revisiting this point. His disciples are not to worry about the signs and times, but to be ever vigilant and watchful for His imminent return.

From Jesus’ sermon here in Matthew, we can learn several things about His return. First, it will follow after the destruction of Jerusalem, yet there is no immediate connection between the two events: Jesus unpacks both in such a way as to distinguish them—one is not a clue to the other.

Second, Jesus coming will be visible to all—everyone alive will see it and mourn if they are not awaiting it (vv. 27-28, 30-31). That Jesus comes with the clouds suggest, from the imagery of Daniel 7 that it employs, that His return will be glorious, a tremendous display of His power and authority.

Third, it will be both a time of judgment and of great hope and salvation (46); this is evident from the mourning of the tribes (30), the appeal to the days of Noah (37-39), the mention of some being taken and others left (40), the potential for judgment upon those who are not awaiting (48-51), and—possibly—from the picture of the vultures (28). At this time, his disciples will be gathered to Himself (31).

Fourth, Jesus emphasizes throughout this sermon, especially in vv. 36-51, that the time of His coming is unknowable. The various illustrations he uses, of those labouring and then being
taken, or the days of Noah, are pictures of suddenness—unexpectedness: people will be going about their daily business, and suddenly Jesus will come for His people and for judgment. The picture of the thief in v. 43 especially captures this: the house owner, if he knows the portion of the night in which the thief is coming, will stay awake to be ready for him. That is, if a house owner knows that a thief is coming, but not exactly when, he would stay awake for him. After AD 70 it is clear that Christ’s coming is at the door, His return is the next thing God has planned, so Jesus’ disciples must wait diligently like the house owner, even if they do not know the exact time. These themes, of judgment and salvation, immanence yet unexpectedness, and visibility appear vividly in Paul’s exposition of Christ’s return in 1 & 2 Thessalonians.

1 & 2 Thessalonians

Almost all of these themes found in Matthew 24 are found again in 1 & 2 Thessalonians, the only possible exception is the visibility of Christ’s return—though Paul’s account is consistent with and may imply this theme. Among the many issues Paul writes to address, both of his letters to the Thessalonians address confusion over the Parousia, Christ’s return.

At the time of the first letter, the Thessalonians seemed to have concerns about the fate of their dead brothers and sisters. This much is suggested by Paul’s primary emphasis upon the salvation that both the dead and the living will receive when Christ returns. It is in 4:13-5:11 that Paul directly addresses the Parousia, but he refers to it twice beforehand. In 1:10, as he gives

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thanks to God for the faith they have, Paul speaks of Jesus coming from heaven to deliver his people, who await him, from coming wrath. As in Matthew 24, we see here the connection between wrath and salvation in Christ’s return. Then, in 2:19, Paul looks to the reward he and his fellow ministers will receive at Christ’s return for the fruit they have reaped among the Thessalonians. These themes of wrath and salvation remain present throughout 4:13-5:11 and the discussion of the day in 2 Thessalonians.

In 4:13, Paul transitions from an exhortation concerning their life with God to inform them about the fate of their dead brethren. Paul assures them that at the Parousia, the living will have no advantage over the dead (15). Jesus, writes Paul, will descend from heaven accompanied by a trumpet call, a commanding cry, and the voice of a chief angel; the dead will rise to meet Him; then those living “will be caught up together with them in the clouds” (16-17). He encourages them: when they have met Christ in the air, they will forevermore be with Him (17).

Though Paul is specifically delineating the relations of both living and dead Christians to the Parousia, his account is parallel to Jesus’ in Matthew 24. He affirms the presence of a loud trumpet call (Matt. 24:31; 1 Thess. 4:16), the gathering of the elect (Matt. 24:31; 1 Thess. 4:16-17), and the salvific blessings they will have on that day (Matt. 24:45-47; 1 Thess. 4:17-18). Paul does not elaborate on the visibility of Jesus’ coming, as in Matt. 24:27-28, but his reference to the trumpet sound and the heavenly voices are consistent with a highly visible appearance (16). This is affirmed in the following verse when he says that believers will be caught up into the clouds, echoing Matthew 24:30 and referring to the glorious nature of Jesus’ appearance. That Paul and Jesus are referring to the same instance as the Parousia becomes even more apparent in Chapter 5, where Paul echoes more clearly Jesus words.
Here, Paul addresses the same topic that Jesus did in Matt. 24:32-51, the timing of the Parousia and the necessity of being watchful, prepared.\textsuperscript{16} Paul begins with Jesus’ last picture, that of a thief. Paul describes the Parousia like the coming of a thief in the night (2): in context, he is has in mind the suddenness and unexpectedness of the timing (3), but he also maintains Jesus’ emphasis on wakefulness. While everyone else is asleep, unaware, the children of the light remain awake, sober, and ready for His return: they do not know the hour, yet they know He is imminent (cf. Matt. 24:43-44). He contrasts believers, who are called to be sober, with those who are asleep: the unbelieving world thinks it lies in “peace and security” (3), but at an unexpected time Christ will come with inescapable, “sudden destruction” (2). This wrath is their destiny, but for believers who are waiting, the Lord’s Parousia is a day of salvation (9-10).

1 Thessalonians, then, refers to a singular coming of Christ that draws heavily upon Jesus’ sermon in Matthew 24. The same themes of wrath and judgment, unexpectedness and immanence, and visibility appear again here. Turning to 2 Thessalonians, these themes are present, though Paul addresses a different misunderstanding.

One does not need to read far in Paul’s second letter to the Thessalonians before it becomes apparent that they were facing persecution (1:4) and were in danger of falling into another error concerning the Lord’s return (2:1-12). Paul draws on the doctrine of Christ’s return both to bring encouragement amidst suffering and to prevent the Thessalonians from falling into the error of thinking that Christ had already returned. First, in 1:5-10, Paul speaks of the relief

\textsuperscript{16} Some dispensational writers suggested that Ch. 5 refers to the Parousia while Ch. 4 the Rapture. There is no textual reason to make this distinction: the flow of the text suggests that both chapters speak of the same event, and the description in Ch. 5 is neither different nor incompatible with Ch. 4. They are both highly reminiscent of Matt. 24. Cf. Gordon Russell Lewis and Bruce A Demarest, Integrative Theology: Historical, Biblical, Systematic, Apologetic, Practical: Three Volumes in One (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1996), 385.
that will they will receive when Christ returns and the judgment that He will pour out at this time upon those afflicting them (1:6-8). In these verses, we see that Christ will come forth from Heaven accompanied by His angels (cf. 1 Thess. 1:19, Jude 14-15) to deal out judgment on those who “do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus” (2 Thess. 1:8). In verse 9, Paul indicates that the judgment that unbelievers will receive at Christ’s return is the final judgment—eternal destruction coming forth from God’s throne. \(^{17}\) Though this day bears wrath for unbelievers, it is also great hope for the Thessalonians and other Christians: it is the day when “he comes… to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed” (10). Thus the Parousia is a day of great hope and relief for believers but wrath and final judgment for unbelievers.

In Chapter 2, Paul begins to clarify the Thessalonians thoughts concerning Christ’s return, he warns them not to be quickly shaken or alarmed, not to think that Christ has already returned (2:1-3). Paul speaks of the Parousia for similar reasons that Jesus did in Matthew 24: they both seek to have those hearing them stand firm and not be deceived by those who would claim that Christ has already come (cf. Matt. 24:4-8; 23-26). The answer Jesus gave was the unmistakable nature of His return (24:27-28); He also separated His return from the fall of Jerusalem (Matt. 24:4-31). Paul, having already spoken of the visibility of Christ’s return (1 Thess. 4:16-17; 2 Thess. 1:9-10), now reminds them of events they know will immediately precede Christ’ return (2:3, 8). If these events have yet to come, Christ also has yet to come (2:3). The nature of these events are notoriously hard to pin down, thus Morris wisely writes, “It is best honestly to admit this and not try to force the passage into conformity with some theory

\(^{17}\) This is the correct sense of the verse: it speaks of God’s wrath coming forth from His presence, not wrath experienced in the absence of His presence. See J. Alexander Rutherford, “2 Thessalonians and Hell: Separation From or Wrath Coming Forth From God”, March 20, 2017.

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we have evolved on the basis of imperfect knowledge.” 18 Though we cannot be certain of the exact referents of “the man of lawlessness” (3) or “he who now restrains” (7), we can summarize broadly Paul’s point. 19 Essentially, Paul writes that immediately before Christ’s return there will arise a significant figure embodying creaturely rebellion against God; he will exult himself in the place of God, do so under the influence of Satan, and face the immediate judgment of Christ at His return (2:3-10). Some argue for a preterist reading of this passage, such that this speaks of Nero, Caligula, or some other figure of the first century. However, the close connection between the rise of this figure and Christ’s return marshals against this reading: for Paul, it appears that when these things happen, Christ will come. 20 Therefore, a futurist reading is more likely: these events are yet to happen, and will be immediately followed by Christ’s return. The Thessalonians, then, could be assured that Christ had not yet returned, for they had not yet

18 Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, 129.

19 Any interpretation proffered with regard to the identities of these must be tentative, but I think there may be a possible identification of the restrainer that is consistent with my overall interpretation of Christ’s return. Paul assumes that his readers know what he is talking about, so he doesn’t explicate it; if God would have us know what Paul means, I believe that He would provide us references elsewhere in Scripture. The only possibility that strikes me is a connection with Rev. 20 and Jesus’ words in the Gospels concerning Satan. That is, the man of lawlessness is impelled by Satan (2 Thess. 2:9), but is at the moment restrained by a both an impersonal restraint (v. 6) and a personal restrainer (v. 7). In Rev. 20:1-3, Satan is said to be bound for a long period of time by an angel and thrown into the pit. On the amillennial view, this is interpreted with reference to Jesus’ binding of the strong man (Matt. 12:29, Mark 3:27) and Satan falling like lightning (Luke 10:18). In Rev. 20:7-9, Satan is said to be released just before final judgment: at this time, he will deceive the nations. This sounds very similar to 2 Thess. 2. If we make this identification, it may explain the restraint/restrainer reference in 2 Thessalonians: as a neuter word, “restraint” fits well anything used to bind Satan and “restrainer” the angel said to have bound him. For the amillennial interpretation of Revelation, see G.K. Beale, The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids; Carlisle: Eerdmans; Paternoster, 1999), 973–1000; Louis A. Brighton, Revelation, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 1999), 544–564; John M. Frame, Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2013), 1090.. The placement of Revelation 20 after 19 is not a problem for this view: the content and surrounding structure provides compelling evidence that Chapter 19 takes place amidst the events delineated after it, cf. Beale, The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text, 983.

20 Notice the difference between Jesus’ argument in Matt. 24, where Christ will come afterwards (then they will see the Son of Man…), whereas here Paul’s language correlates the revealing of the man of lawlessness with Christ’s appearing in judgment (esp. 2:8).
experienced their ultimate salvation, witnessed the final judgment, or even seen the man of lawlessness appear.

We, therefore, see the same themes identified in Matthew 24 and 1 Thessalonians repeated here. Christ will appear bringing both salvation and wrath, and believers will be gathered to Christ (2 Thess. 2:1; using the same word as Matt. 24:31). Jesus’ coming will be visible because there will be immediate judgment and He will be accompanied by hosts of angels (1:7, 2:8). Though immanence is not explicit here, Paul does emphasize that the “mystery of lawlessness” is already at work (7) and teaches the Christ’s return will be closely tied with this imminent emergence of the man of Lawlessness. So, 2 Thessalonians does not teach explicitly that the Parousia is immanent—which would not aid Paul’s immediate purpose—but what Paul does say is compatible with its immanence. The Thessalonians knew already that Christ’s return was immanent, yet it will be immediately preceded by the appearance of the man of lawlessness—an event that is yet to come.

What we can, therefore, summarize from these passages concerning Christ’s return are these points: ever since AD 70, Christ has been at the threshold, His coming is near—the last event scheduled in redemptive history—yet it will be immediately preceded by the appearance of the man of lawlessness. Thus, the rise of the man of lawlessness will happen suddenly, unexpectedly, as will the closely tied, sudden coming of Christ. This Parousia will be visible for all to see: the whole world will see and either rejoice or mourn at the arrival of the true King in all His glory accompanied by an angelic army. As Jesus descends, dead saints will rise to join Him and living believers will be caught up as well, coming together with the angelic host as Jesus’ fierce entourage. This will be judgment for the world of unbelief, but joyous salvation for
those who have believed: they will from that point on always be with Jesus. All this will happen at once: none of these passages suggest that Christ will return twice, their details all corresponding to the same event. Though these are key texts in the argument for the rapture, they are not the only ones: we have only looked at three passages so far; we must now turn to the rest of the New Testament Scriptures that speak of Christ’s return(s).

The New Testament Testimony to Christ’s Return

The New Testament is replete with references to the Parousia: the return of Christ is woven throughout the apostolic testimony. Each reference applies the truth that Christ will return to different circumstances, thus drawing on different aspects of it, but the testimony given by the whole NT is consistent with what we have seen so far in Matthew and 1 & 2 Thessalonians. The easiest way to consider the relevant verses will be to group them together under the themes we saw above; wrath and salvation, immanence and unexpectedness, and visibility. First, though, we will look at three passages—in addition to Matthew 24:3, 14—that link Christ return with the end of the age—the new creation and glorification of believers.

**Christ’s Return and the New Creation**

If the rapture is true, then those who believe, both the living and the dead, at Christ’s first return will be resurrected—glorified—and then the general resurrection and new creation (?) will happen after Christ’s millennial rule. Yet there are at least three NT passages that connect the glorification of believers—which is said to occur at the rapture—and Christ’s return with the passing away of the sin-cursed Old Creation and the arrival of the New Creation.

Encouraging the Romans in his 8th chapter that present suffering is nothing compared to the glories to come (Rom. 8:18), even a necessary step to getting there (8:28-30), Paul relates the believers hope for glory to the hope of the whole creation. All of creation suffers under the curse (20-22), yet will be free on the day that believers inherit glory (21). We are saved in hope of this glory (24); likewise the whole creation “waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God” (19), for at this time it will be freed from the curse. If believers receive glory at Christ’s return, which is amply attested in the passages we have already seen, then the whole creation will also be recreated at this time.

Paul’s next letter affirms this. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul defends a future resurrection by the Gospel and the resurrection of Christ. Christ resurrection is the anticipation, the firstfruits, of the believers’ resurrection (20, 23): those who belong to Christ will be raised at His coming (23). After this, writes Paul, is the end: every enemy will be put in subjection to Christ, even death.

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22 It is not always clear in Dispensational writings that there will be a New Creation. For those who believe in a new creation, if is to be a creation free from the stain of sin—as Rom. 8 and 2 Pet. 3:12-13 attest—it can only be made after the millennium. Blaising and Bock hold to a post-millennium new creation. Despite this, Geisler asserts that the creation will be renewed at the beginning of the Millennium. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Bridgepoint Books, 2000), 32–33, 271; Clouse, “Rapture of the Church,” 983; Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology: In One Volume* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2011), 1425; Ryrie, *A Survey of Bible Doctrine*.

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itself will be put in subjection (24-28). Again, Christ’s return is connected with the end of all things.

Finally, 2 Peter 3:7-13 testifies that with Christ’s coming the old, cursed creation will pass away and the promised New Creation will be established. Having described the present creation as being stored up for destruction in the day of judgment (7), Peter then writes “the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed” (10). As Jesus spoke of this day with the exhortation to wait expectantly for it, so also Peter exhorts his readers (13-14). These three passages connect the Day of the Lord with the salvation of believers and the judgment of the world, followed by its recreation. This complements well the theme of wrath and judgment that we saw earlier in Matthew 24 and 1 & 2 Thessalonians. These themes make up the most frequent references to the Christ’s return in the NT.

Christ’s Return for Wrath and Salvation

The amount of texts that mention Christ’s return as a time of judgment and salvation are too numerous to allow a discussion of each, so I will only discuss 2 of the most relevant ones. The first of these is John 14:3, a text cited by some as evidence for two distinct returns of

23 Christ is presently reigning (Matt. 28:18), and with this resurrection, the last enemy will be destroyed, thus it will be the end (1 Cor. 15:24-26). Cf. Gordon D. Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 754.


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Christ. In this text, Jesus tells his disciples “I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.” Here, Jesus speaks of His return as moment of salvation: His disciples will be with him forever. Geisler suggests that this contradicts—if Christ only returns once—Revelation 19:14, where the armies of heaven follow after Him. In Jude 14, the army is angelic, but in Revelation the reference to “white robes” indicates that these are believers: so when Christ comes for judgment, believers will accompany Him. There need be no contradiction if Christ returns only once, for both Matthew and Thessalonians connect Christ’s return with wrath and salvation; with a bit of imagination we can picture the scenario these texts describe. Christ will come forth for judgment with His angelic army; as He comes forth, believers—living and dead—will be resurrected and caught up to join Him in judging the earth. They will never again leave His side and enter into the New Creation with Him immediately afterward. That Christ will return once more for both salvation and judgment is explicitly affirmed in the next passages we will consider, from the book of Hebrews.

In Hebrews, the author writes to warn and exhort believers dangerously close to turning from Christ back to Judaism: he warns them that in Christ alone is salvation and that if they turn from Him, they will face judgment at His return—what is to be a day of glorious hope will be a day of judgment. In 9:28, the author writes that Christ will “appear a second time, not to deal with sin [as He did on the Cross] but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.”

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26 That “deal with sin” refers to the Cross is evident from the book’s argument.
the reference to judgment in the previous verse may suggest that this second coming will also be for judgment, this is not made explicit until Chapter 10.27

In 10:19-39, the author presents one of several warning passages that occur at key points in the book. Here, he speaks of final judgment. Reminding the Hebrews of their previous confidence (32-36), the author turns to Christ’s return and warns them of the peril of rejecting the faith in light of His ever immanent return. Adapting the Greek texts of Habakkuk 2:3-4 and Isaiah 26:20,28 the author sets forth the two possible responses one could take towards Christ’s return. In the Isaiah passage, God comes forth for wrath against the inhabitants of the earth; in the context of Habakkuk, God has revealed that He is coming forth at the head of the Chaldean army to judge Judah. Hab. 2:3 speaks of the fulfillment of the vision; here the author of Hebrews applies the text to the return of Christ. Hab. 2:4 defines two possible responses to the vision: one of faith, believing and thus living; and the other of fear and rebelling—in Hebrew, running (2:2, 4);29 in Greek, shrinking back (2:4). Thus Christ’s return offers salvation to the one waiting for it, but for the one who shrinks back, it promises destruction (Heb. 10:39). Christ’s return is immanent for the author of Hebrews—it will not delay—and it is both a great day of salvation (9:28; 10:35-36, 38) and of horrifying judgment (10:26-31, 38-39).30 Hebrews then, envisages a single return of Christ, which involves both wrath and salvation and is very near and will not


29 My translation: “So that the one who reads it might run—…..—Behold, it is bloated: his appetite is not upright within him.”

delay. The immanence, nearness, of our Lord’s coming seen here Hebrews 10:37 is amply attested elsewhere in the New Testament.

The Immanence of Christ’s Return

The immanence of Christ’s return is seen as a significant argument in favour of the Rapture: it is supposed that many signs need to precede the Parousia—Christ’s final coming—so only an invisible return for believers such as the rapture could be truly immanent.31 We have already seen from Matthew and the letters to the Thessalonians that Christ will return once and that this return is immanent despite the presence of signs such as the appearance of the Man of lawlessness. Hebrews definitely indicates that the Parousia, Christ returning for salvation and judgment, is imminent. In addition to these references, numerous other Scriptures testify to this. Exhorting his readers to be patient in suffering, James tells them to await the Lord’s coming. He describes it as at hand (5:8), it is near: “the Judge is standing at the door” (5:9). At the end of John’s Revelation, Jesus tells John that He is coming soon (22:7, 12, 20), for judgment and salvation (22:12-14).32 So Jesus’ return is immanent, it is very close, yet the return described in these verses does not fit the rapture: Jesus’ is returning soon for salvation and for judgment. 1 Peter 4:7 affirms that the end of all things is at hand (cf. 13), which is consistent with an immanent Parousia, not an immanent rapture. As we saw from 2 Thessalonians, immanence and accompanying signs are not incompatible: for Paul, the man of lawlessness must come first, but Christ will come at that time as well. The immanence of the man of lawlessness’ emergence

31 Clouse, “Rapture of the Church,” 984; Ryrie, A Survey of Bible Doctrine.
32 See also, Rev. 3:11, 1 Pet. 4:7, Phil. 4:5, Heb. 10:25.
supports the immanence of Christ’s return. Many of the other arguments against an immanent Parousia are based on specific interpretations of the tribulation and millennium, yet if the overwhelming testimony of Scripture attests to an immanent Parousia and no rapture, those specific interpretations must be reconsidered. The last feature of our Lord’s Return that the NT teaches is its visibility—it will be unmistakable.

The Visibility of Christ’s Return

We have already seen the visibility of Jesus’ return in Matthew 24 and Thessalonians: Christ will come on clouds, indicating a great display of glory; accompanied by loud noises and voices (if these are not to be taken literally, they at least mean that His return will be highly visible); and, like lightning across the sky or vultures circling their prey, all will see Him and rejoice or mourn. The visibility of His return is compounded by the events that will accompany it: the man of lawlessness will emerge and be slain, judgment will be poured out on earth and then in Hell, and the creation will be remade. Rev. 1:7 makes the visible nature of His return all the more clear: “every eye will see him” and “all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him.” And, however we interpret the specific referent of the imagery (what it will look like when it actually happens),33 John’s vision of Christ coming forth from heaven on a horse followed by the armies of heaven surely indicates that Christ’s Parousia will be clearly visible (Revelation 19:11-21).

33 That is, the imagery used is not meant to be taken literally. Interpretation of the book of Revelation is notoriously difficult. John receives highly symbolic visions which he then relays. It is not enough to ask what the text says, but what the text means and what reality the symbolism points to. The visions are also often not in chronological order: e.g., Chapter 19 describes a reality that takes place during or after the events in the following chapter. For an introduction to the interpretive difficulties surrounding Revelation, see Beale, The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text; Carson and Moo, An Introduction to the New Testament.
The entire New Testament, therefore, supports our initial exegesis of Matthew 24 and Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians. In these passages we identified the key themes with which Christ’s return is described: wrath and salvation, immanence and unexpectedness, and visibility. The rest of the NT has affirmed these themes in conjunction with one specific return of Christ. We saw nowhere in the NT evidence that Christ will return two more times—once invisibly to take up believers and another for judgment. From the testimony of the NT, we can describe the Parousia, or Christ’s return, in this way: The New Testament teaches that Christ will return once more to glorify His people, both the living and the dead, and complete their salvation, catching them up into the clouds to join Him and His angels as He brings judgment first to those living upon the earth and then, in Hell, to those who have died. This Parousia will be visible to the entire earth and is imminent. Christ has been at the threshold for almost 2000 years, but the exact date of His return is unknown: He will come unexpectedly, but His coming will be immediately preceded by the emergence of the man of lawlessness spoken of in 2 Thessalonians. At this time, the end will come: the old creation will pass away and God will usher in a new creation, free from the stain of sin. From this point on, Christ’s people will always be with Him.

Concerning the doctrine of the rapture, our summary of the NT teaching shows that there is not a hint of it in the Biblical teaching. Those events usually associated with the rapture are united with the events usually associated with the Parousia: they constitute one event. With Hebrews, we can affirm that Christ will come back a second time for the salvation of His people and for destruction to those who shrink back. No text struggled to reconcile Christ’s immanence
with accompanying signs, so neither should we. Nor did the tension between Christ’s coming from heaven for judgment and taking His believer’s to be with Himself necessitate two separate comings: Scripture teaches that Christ will resurrect and catch up His people to join Him as He comes down for judgment against the earth—both events happen at the same time.

Jesus told John, “Behold, I am coming soon,” and instructed us to be ever watchful and sober minded, awaiting His return (Rev. 22:7, 12, 20; Matt. 24:31-51). Peter writes that we should seek to hasten the day as we wait for it (2 Pet. 3:12). The burden of the New Testament teaching concerning Christ’s return is to keep the Church vigilant, always ready, and hopeful in anticipation of an eternity that awaits them (Matt. 24:31-51; 1 Thess. 5:1-11). This hope of glory is our fuel as we seek to redeem the time given us to further the mission of the Kingdom through Christ’s Church (Eph. 5:15-17; 1 Pet. 1:13-21, 4:7-11); this hope is also our great encouragement when we face sufferings and trials (2 Cor. 4:17; 1 Peter 1:3-9). The burden of the New Testament teaching is also to keep us from speculation, we are to be every vigilant for He is immanent, yet sober-minded for His return is unexpected—“for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect” (Matt. 24:44). Thus with joyous anticipation and wakeful hearts, we pray with Paul, maranatha—“Our Lord, come!”

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34 Cf. Clouse, “Rapture of the Church,” 984; Ryrie, A Survey of Bible Doctrine.

35 Contra Geisler, Systematic Theology.

36 1 Cor. 16:22
Bibliography


