

Two Future Parousias (Comings) for Christ?

(This is an appendix for my self-study course on the Thessalonian Epistles.)

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Though rich and rewarding, the study of biblical predictive prophecy is not easy. The Pretribulation Rapture View proposes solutions for some difficulties. For example, it identifies the removal of the Restrainer in 2 Thessalonians 2 as the Rapture of the church. Rightly or wrongly, however, this view creates new problems. For example, it proposes that when applied to Christ's future coming, terms like *parousia* have more than one meaning.

Our Lord made it quite clear that He will some day return in glory to establish His kingdom. Bible teachers often call that return the Second Coming. The New Testament uses various Greek expressions to refer to it. One is the simple verb *erkomai*, meaning *come* (for example, Matt. 16:27, 28; 23:39; 24:30, 42, 44; 25:31; 26:64; Rev. 1:7; 16:15; 22:7, 12, 20). Another is the verb *apokalupto*, meaning *reveal* (Luke 17:30; cf. 1 Peter 1:5; 5:1), and its related noun *apokalupsis*, meaning *revelation* (1 Peter 4:13; cf. Rom. 2:5). Similar to these is the verb *phaneroo*, meaning *reveal, make known* (Col. 3:4). Yet another is the noun *epiphaneia*, meaning *brightness or glorious appearing* (2 Tim. 4:1; Titus 2:13; cf. 2 Thess. 2:8). Except for *erkomai*, all of these terms suggest public appearance.¹

Probably the best-known term for His return is the noun *parousia*, which literally means *presence* (2 Cor. 10:10). This noun was also used of the *coming* of humans (1 Cor. 16:17; 2 Cor. 7:6, 7; Phil. 1:26) or—in pagan literature—of gods. Like most of the terms above, it suggests public appearance. In fact, it had become “the official term for a visit of a person of high rank, especially of kings and emperors visiting a province.”² Therefore, it is appropriate for “the coming of the lawless one” (2 Thess. 2:9) when he is finally “revealed” on earth (v. 8). And it is even more appropriate for the Lord's glorious and public Second Coming to rule. That is its meaning the only times *parousia* is used in the Gospels or Acts: Matthew 24:3, 27, 37, and 39.

In the rest of the New Testament, *parousia* is used of His coming twelve times, half of them in the Thessalonian epistles (1 Cor. 15:23; 1 Thess. 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; 2 Thess. 2:1, 8; James 5:7, 8; 2 Peter 1:16; 3:4; 1 John 2:28). In some of these *parousia* obviously means what you would expect from its use in Matthew: the Second Coming to rule. That is true, for example, in 2 Peter 1:16, which associates it with the words “power” and “majesty”—and with “the eternal kingdom” in verse 11. In some passages, however, the Pretribulation Rapture View requires that the term have a different meaning. When the term involves the Rapture, pretribulationists believe that it refers to a different coming of Christ, several years before the Second Coming:

- Different in character—not public but secret
- Different in time—not after the 70th Week (and Tribulation) for Israel but before it
- Different in purpose—not to judge the world and set up the kingdom but to rapture the church

¹ Yet, in some passages pretribulationists interpret nearly all of these terms to mean a secret and separate Rapture: *apokalupsis* in 1 Cor. 1:7; 2 Thess. 1:7; 1 Peter 1:7, 13; *phaneroo* in 1 Peter 5:4; 1 John 2:28; 3:2; *epiphaneia* in 1 Tim. 6:14; 2 Tim. 4:8.

² William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (4th ed.; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952), 635.

Pretribulationists thus have two distinct meanings for the Lord's *parousia*.³ They can see both of these meanings in a single passage, such as, 2 Thessalonians 2:1 and 2:8 in the following chart.

Pretribulation Rapture View
Showing Two Comings (*Parousias*) for the Lord

← Current Age →	Lord's ↓ ↑ Coming for church *Rapture* (2 Th. 2:1)	70th Week Rebellion and Man of Sin Great Tribu- lation	↓ Lord's Coming with church to rule *2 nd Coming* (2 Th. 2:8)	← Kingdom →
Day of the Lord →				

The meaning of *parousia* is particularly important in the letters to the Thessalonians. In them Paul refers to the Lord's future coming in every chapter but the last. In six of those references he calls it the *parousia*. At least once—in 2 Thessalonians 2:8—this term means the same thing as in Matthew. That verse clearly refers to the public glory and judgment of the Second Coming: the Lord “will overthrow...and destroy [the man of sin] by the splendor [*epiphaneia*] of his coming [*parousia*].” But the other five passages say little or nothing about the public aspect, only the relation of the *parousia* to the church or individuals. Therefore, in most or all of those passages, pretribulationists deny that the term still refers to the Second Coming. Instead, it refers to a separate, secret, and earlier Rapture,⁴ as do some of the other terms (see footnote 8).

Observe how pretribulationists interpret three references to the Lord's coming in three nearly successive paragraphs of 2 Thessalonians (1:5-10; 2:1-4; and 2:5-12). As seen above, they recognize that the *parousia* in 2 Thessalonians 2:8 will be glorious and public. So will the *apokalupsis* in 1:7. In it persecuted believers will get “relief...when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels.” Yet, sandwiched between these two references to the Second Coming is another reference to “the coming [*parousia*] of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2:1) that pretribulationists interpret differently. This *parousia* apparently includes the Rapture (“our being gathered to him”), which—by pretribulation calculation—will be separate from the Second Coming. Thus, they interpret as follows:

³ Another view is that there is one *parousia* embracing many events over various years. That view raises a different set of problems.

⁴ Pretribulationists have different opinions about 1 Thessalonians 3:13: “...so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.” In the Old Testament and inter-testamental Judaism, “holy ones” who come with God are angels. So are the ones who come with the Lord in Mark 8:38, Luke 9:26, and Jude 14, which reflect the prophecy of Zechariah 14:5. Some therefore believe that Paul's similar prophecy in 1 Thessalonians 3:13 refers to the same Second Coming—with angels—for judgment. (He draws the same picture in 2 Thess. 1:7.) Others emphasize that by “holy ones” Paul elsewhere means Christians. They then interpret 3:13 as they do 4:14—that the souls of Christians will come with Christ at the Rapture.

2 Thess. 1:7	2:1	2:8
<i>apokalupsis</i>	<i>parousia</i>	<i>parousia</i>
Second Coming	Rapture	Second Coming

Words do acquire new meanings. Therefore, we should test the possibility that the Lord's *parousia* could mean two different things in New Testament epistles. Sometimes it clearly meant Christ's Second Coming, as it did in Christ's teaching. What evidence is there that it sometimes refers to another coming distinct in time and character? Walvoord seems to give no historical evidence. He finds no Rapture at all in Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John 1-13. Jesus' "first mention of the Rapture" was in John 14:1-3—just before His death.⁵ But even John 14 was unclear, says Walvoord, because the disciples still did not understand that He would leave them and return. To the extent that they understood His departure, they believed that the Rapture "was a part of the promise to come to earth a second time." In other words, the disciples saw no distinction between the Rapture and the Second Coming. Walvoord cites no other passage in John or Acts in which such a distinction was made.

When, then, was the separate Rapture explained? "Much later Paul was converted, and God revealed the doctrine of the Rapture to him....Apparently he introduced the doctrine of the Rapture to the Thessalonians....to them, he explained the Rapture at length".⁶ Thus Walvoord believes that the first clear written explanations of the Rapture were in the two Thessalonian epistles. At this point, *parousia* and similar terms could each refer to two separate events. If so, how does the pretribulationist determine their meaning in each passage? By his own eschatological framework. If the passage deals with public glory, judgment, and the kingdom, it must be the Second Coming. If it deals only with individuals and the church, it must be the Rapture. There is still no passage that distinguishes them in time: "No biblical passage states precisely when the Rapture will occur in relation to the tribulation or the Second Coming" (Walvoord, p. 112). The real reason for separating them is doctrinal, not historical.⁷

Pretribulationist Distinctions of Two Future *Parousias* for the Lord

<i>Parousia</i> # 1 (as in 2 Thess. 2:1) (called "the Rapture" by pretribulationists)	<i>Parousia</i> # 2 (as in 2 Thess. 2:8) (called "the Second Coming" by pretribulationists)
Purpose—to take the church away	Purpose—to begin the kingdom
Imminent—has no predicted event before it	Not imminent—follows other events
The only expected event before the Day of the Lord	Comes after other signs of the Day of the Lord
Comes before the Seventieth Week for Israel	Comes after the Seventieth Week for Israel
Secret to the world in general	Glorious and public before the world

⁵ John F. Walvoord, *Prophecy: 14 Essential Keys to Understanding the Final Drama* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993), 109.

⁶ Walvoord, *Prophecy*, p. 110.

⁷ Most pretribulationists see little in common between the church and the nation of Israel. When any passage involves promises or warnings to Israel, they feel justified in keeping them separated.

Are both these alleged comings found side by side in any paragraph? Walvoord thinks he sees both of them in Titus 2:13, where the KJV speaks of “that **blessed hope**, and the **glorious appearing** of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ.” Walvoord assumes without discussion that these two titles refer to separate events. Then he argues that the first title proves that the Rapture will be before the Tribulation, because “a rapture climaxing a tribulation is hardly a blessed hope” (p. 114). The NIV gives a different possible translation of Titus 2:13: “We wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.”⁸ That translation agrees with many other passages, that our hope is for the Lord to come in His kingdom.

Now compare the Post-tribulation Rapture View, which has only one *parousia*.

Post-tribulation Rapture View
Relation of Lord’s Coming, 70th Week, Day of the Lord

← Current Age →	70th Week Rebellion and Man of Sin	↓ Lord’s Coming for church (Rapture) and to rule (2 Th. 2:1, 8)	← Kingdom →
		Day of the Lord →	

This post-tribulation view is simpler because it keeps the same meaning for Christ’s *parousia* in Matthew and the Epistles. “Simpler,” however, does not mean better unless it better fits all the facts and Scriptures. For example, here are some of the questions pretribulationists often ask post-tribulationists: (a) Who is the Restrainer if not God-in-the-church? (b) How can the Lord’s coming for believers be imminent if the Tribulation must come first? (c) Don’t Revelation 3:10; 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 5:9 mean that the church will escape God’s wrath during that Tribulation?⁹

Post-tribulationists also have questions to ask pretribulationists. For example: (a) Why did the Church Fathers not know your view? If the Lord truly revealed a separate Rapture, did the whole church miss the point or forget it? (b) Is it likely that the Lord’s *parousia* would refer to two separate comings that can sometimes be distinguished only by theology? (c) Won’t those converted during the Tribulation (Rev. 7) be baptized in the Spirit—which results in union with Christ and His church (1 Cor. 12:12-13)? (d) By insisting that the only predicted event before

⁸ In Greek a single article ties together the nouns *hope* and *appearing*. Thus, the two nouns are closely related and possibly refer to the same event. Though it is unusual that two entities thus joined are identical, an example is Acts 1:25. There NIV combines “this ministry and apostleship” (literal) as “this apostolic ministry.”

⁹ To summarize another question: If all believers are glorified in a Rapture just before the millennium starts, where will the rebels come from at the end of the millennium (Rev. 20)? Glorified people will not marry. Therefore, there must be enough time after the Rapture to accumulate a group of unglorified people to enter the millennium. As the centuries of the millennium pass, many descendants of these people will become rebellious.

the Day of the Lord is the Rapture, don't you contradict 2 Thessalonians 2:3: "that day **will not come until** the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed"?¹⁰

These are only samples of the many issues in the Rapture question. That question is worthy of continued study. But observe the following precautions.

- The Rapture question should not be allowed to divide evangelical believers in their service and communion. The order of final events is interesting but not essential.

The Rapture question should not take the place of seeking "his kingdom and his righteousness" (Matt. 6:33). The Lord did not tell us to pray for the Rapture but for the kingdom to come (Matt. 6:10). Whether we escape the Tribulation or not, our hope is His coming kingdom.

¹⁰ Walvoord erases the problem by making the verse refer to "the Second Coming" rather than "the Day of the Lord." He says, "The 'falling away' will occur before **the Second Coming** (2 Thess. 2:3). The 'man of sin' must come to power and reveal himself before **the Second Coming** will occur (v. 3)" (p. 115, bolding added). Perhaps Walvoord forgets that he himself begins the Day of the Lord seven years before the Second Coming. A more common pretribulationist solution to this problem is to accept that the final rebellion/apostasy may *start* but cannot reach its climax before the Day of the Lord. "The Day of the Lord will not be present until this great apostasy sweeps the earth" (Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *First and Second Thessalonians*, p. 104).