

“Thief in the Night”

Matthew 24:36-44; Revelation 3:1-3; John 21:18-23

East Berlin Community Church

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October 31, 2021

Introduction

- Personal experience with a *“thief in the night”*
- Jesus’ Promise of His return
 - The **SURETY** of Christ’s return
 - John 14:3-- *“If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.”*
 - The **SEQUENCE** of Christ’s return
 - 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17-- *“For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.”*
 - The **SWITCH** at Christ’s return
 - 1 Corinthians 15:51-52-- *“Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.”*
 - Philippians 3:20b-21-- *“eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to that it may conform to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able to subdue all things to Himself.”*
- **Relationship of the Rapture to the Tribulation. Four Major Views**
 - **Pre-tribulation**—Jesus returns for his bride, the church, prior to the tribulation period
 - **Mid-tribulation**—Jesus returns in the middle of the tribulation before the “great tribulation” begins
 - **Pre-wrath**—Jesus returns before the last series of judgments when God pours out His wrath
 - **Post-tribulation**—The rapture and the return of Christ occur simultaneously at the end of the trib

“Thief in the Night”—Christ’s Imminent Return

A. Jesus Christ coming as a *“thief in the night”*

1. **Revealed in the Olivet Discourse**
 - Matthew 24:36—*“But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only.”*
 - Matthew 24:42-44--*“Watch, therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. Therefore, you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.”*
2. **Warning to the church of Sardis**
 - Revelations 3:2-3-- , *“Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God. Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore, if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you.”*

B. *What is meant by the imminent return of Christ?*

C. The apostles and early church believed in the imminent return of Christ.

1. Paul to the Church of Thessalonica

- 1 Thessalonians 4:15-- *"We who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord."*

2. Paul to the church at Philippi

- Philippians 3:20—4:1-- *"And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. Therefore my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends."*

3. Paul to the church at Corinth

- 1 Corinthians 1:7-- *"you come short in no gift eagerly waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ."*
- 1 Corinthians 1:8-- *"will also confirm you to the end, that you may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ."*

4. Paul to the Christians on Crete-- Titus 2

5. James to the Hebrew Christians scattered

- James 5:7-8-- *"Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives early and latter rain. You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand."*

6. The early church believed that Christ would come back in their lifetime.

- John 21:20-23 -- *"Then Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following, who also had leaned on His breast at the supper and said, 'Lord, who is the one who betrays you?' Peter, seeing him, said to Jesus, 'But Lord, what about this man?' Jesus said to him, 'If I will that he remains till I come, what is that to you? You follow me.' Then this saying went out among the brethren that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but 'If I will that he remains till I come, what is that to you?'"*

D. OBJECTION: What about the predicted death of Peter in John 21:18-19?

- John 21:18-19-- *"Most assuredly I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish." This he spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to Him, 'Follow Me."*

1. **Problem:** How could the early church believe in the imminent return of Jesus Christ if Jesus foretold that Peter would die in his old age?

2. **Solution:**

- a. "Old age" is relative. Could refer to one year, five years, ten years or more.
- b. Jesus sets a definite end time of Peter, not how long it would be before he dies, but only that he will die before Christ's return.
- c. Peter's life was in danger from the very inception of the church. Peter dies approximately 25 years after the resurrection of Jesus Christ, after which Jesus could return.
- d. This is well within the lifetime of those living in the early church.

E. Christians throughout church history believed in the imminent return of Christ.

1. Early Church fathers

- **Clement of Rome** (1st Century)-- *"Behold the Lord comes, and His reward is before His face, to render every man according to his works." Let us therefore earnestly strive to be found in the number of those that wait therefore earnestly for Him in order that we may share in His promised gifts."*
- **Ignatius of Antioch** (AD 110)-- *"Be watchful, possessing a sleepless spirit... Be ever coming more zealous than what thou art. Weigh carefully the times. Look for Him who is above all time, eternal and invisible, yet who became visible for our sake."*
- **Irenaeus** (AD 125-202)-- *"When in the end the church shall be suddenly caught up from this, it is said: 'There shall be tribulation such as has not been since the beginning, neither shall be.' For this is the last contest of the righteous, in which, when they overcome they are crowned with incorruption."*

- **Cyril of Jerusalem** (AD 315-387)-- *“Let us wait and look for the Lord’s coming upon the clouds from heaven. Then shall angelic trumpets sound; the dead in Christ shall rise first.”*
2. **The writings of the Reformers and post-reformation theologians**
- **Martin Luther**-- *“ I believe that all the signs which are to precede the last days have already appeared. Let us not think that the coming of Christ is far off; let us look up with heads lifted up; let us expect our Redeemer’s coming with longing and cheerful minds.”*
 - **John Calvin**-- *“ As He has promised that He will return to us, we ought to hold ourselves prepared, at every moment, to receive Him, that He may not find us sleeping.” “He wished them to be uncertain as to His coming, but yet to be prepared to expect Him every day, or rather every moment.”*
 - **John Knox**-- *“The Lord Jesus shall return and that with expedition. What were this else to reform the face of the whole earth, which never was nor yet shall be, till the righteous King and Judge appear for the restoration of all things.”*
 - **George Whitefield**-- *“Perhaps today, perhaps this midnight... Let that cry, ‘Behold, the bridegroom cometh!’ be continually sounding in your ears, and begin now to live as though you were assured that this night you were to go forth to meet Him.”*
 - **John Wesley**-- *“Expect Him every hour. Now He is nigh, even at the door.”*
 - **Charles Haddon Spurgeon**-- *“The Scripture has left the whole matter, as far as I can see, with an intentional indistinctiveness, that we may always be expecting Christ to come, and that we may be watching for his coming at any hour and every hour... He may not come for a thousand years; He may come tonight!”*
3. **BOTTOM LINE:** Universal acceptance that Jesus Christ’s coming is imminent!

F. **ANALYSIS: Which of the four views of the timing of the rapture best accommodates a “thief in the night” return?**

1. Any return after the beginning of the tribulation would be “time-dated”.
2. Only the pre-tribulation rapture view allows for the “*any moment*” coming of Jesus Christ.