

## Come Quickly Lord Jesus

*He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming quickly." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.*

~~ Revelation 22:20

It is lamentable that the book of Revelation is rarely appealed to for doctrine and exhortation. Although its pages abound with Scriptural allusion, despite its containing direct imperatives (blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book), and notwithstanding the brilliant imagery of Christ's might, splendor, and dominion John's Apocalypse remains a sealed book to many readers of the Bible. Confusion regarding its nature and message effectively serves to ward off the average lay-reader as well as ensure its being passed over in the vast majority of doctrinal preaching.

While it is outside the scope of the present article to remedy this dilemma it is hoped that some light can be shed on just one of the numerous important doctrines and themes which appear in the pages of this final book of the Bible. The particular topic which will here draw our attention is that of Christ's coming as it is invoked in John's closing prayer of chapter 22.

The words of John in the close of Revelation, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus," have in our day come to be interpreted in the standard-fare "rapture ready" mindset. In accordance with this reading John's final prayer is that Christ remove him from this earthly scene of doom and destruction. Much to the contrary, we will find that far from petitioning God for his own removal from earthly service, John's prayer is a display in the confidence he has that Christ will presently comfort His afflicted people and that it will be Christ's enemies (not the Church) who are removed.<sup>1</sup>

Although frequently ignored or overlooked today the usage of the term "coming" is, throughout Scripture, very pregnant with a meaning that is of the utmost importance for the reader to understand. This is readily on display in the question which the Apostles put to Christ in Matthew 24:3 when they ask Him, "what shall be the sign of thy coming?" The context of this question is Jesus' bold proclamation that the temple in Jerusalem would soon be destroyed. In response to this statement the Apostles press Christ with a series of questions regarding the timing of this destruction, the sign of Christ's coming, and the end of the world.

For the Apostles the answers to these three questions would be bound up together. They could not imagine a world without their beloved Jerusalem and it was unthinkable to them that there could ever come a day in which the glorious temple would come to ruin. It was their expectation that Christ had come to deliver, establish, and rule from Jerusalem and its temple, not prophecy their destruction. The second of their questions, and the focus of our study, has to do with this expectation of kingdom and deliverance.

When the Apostles ask "*what shall be the sign of thy coming?*" they do not have in mind Christ's death, resurrection, ascension, and physical return at the end of history. This would be most unnatural. It is

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<sup>1</sup> The attentive reader will recognize the similarity between this interpretation of John's words in Revelation 22:20 and the prayer of Christ which John records in the seventeenth chapter of His Gospel. In John 17:15 Christ prays for His church saying "I pray not that Thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou keepest them from evil." There is an essential harmony between Christ's priestly prayer in Gethsemane and John's closing petition in his Apocalypse.

made abundantly clear in the gospels as well as the opening chapter of Acts that the Apostles had little, if any, notion of how Christ's earthly ministry would play out and of the work which He must perform. The idea that He should leave them was not clear in their minds. On top of that Christ was immediately present with them at the time of their inquiry. Why would the Apostles be asking Jesus about the signs of His "coming" when he was presently with them and they only poorly, if at all, possessed any knowledge of His eventual ascension, session, and final return in triumph? The Apostles were rather asking of Jesus a much different kind of question. They were asking Him when He would begin to establish His kingdom.

By the first century AD the Jewish expectation of a coming Messiah had largely come to be a very carnal, as well as fanatical, thing. Centuries of oppression from the hands of the Greeks and the Romans had left the people of Jerusalem greatly desiring a physical deliverer who would slay their enemies and establish a distinctively Jewish kingdom. This time of deliverance for the suffering people would be a time of coming. It would be the fulfillment of that great hope of Israel which the prophets had long kept alive. Zechariah 9:9 is just one example in the hope of a "coming" of the foretold deliverer:

*Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee.*

In their zeal for earthly prosperity it had been largely lost on the Jewish nation (laudable exceptions such as Simeon and Anna notwithstanding) that the coming Messiah would establish a spiritual kingdom and that His deliverance would be one, not from earthly struggle, but from the dominion of sin and Satan.

With this expectation in mind the disciples who followed Jesus throughout His ministry were waiting, more or less patiently, for Him to move beyond mere religious instruction and get into the real work of driving out the Roman government and establishing Jerusalem as the seat of His Messianic empire. This desire on the part of the people is readily on display in John 6:15 where the multitude would have Him be king over them. It is also on display in the thinking of the Apostles and those closest to them in passages such as Matthew 20:21 where the mother of James and John asks if her two sons may sit by Christ's side once He established the kingdom. It is not this woman's perception that Christ would rule over a spiritual dominion, sitting at the right hand of the father. She is rather asking that her two sons be earthly rulers in the Messiah's physical dominion.

Peter also is constantly prepared for the fighting to start. All the way up to using his sword to cut off an ear from one of the Jewish soldiers who came to arrest Jesus in Gethsemane he can be seen misunderstanding the true nature of the kingdom which Christ was to establish.

So with this bit of background in mind it is not surprising that in the context of Matthew 24:3 the Apostles are curious about when Christ will begin to reign with power. They are expectant of a carnal display of glory that will shatter their earthly foes and forever establish Jerusalem as the seat of the Messianic dominion. Unbeknownst to them Christ had another sort of coming in mind.

But this brings us back to the language of "coming." Why did the Apostles phrase the question the way they did? Why employ the term "coming" instead of just bluntly asking when it was that He would begin to avenge Himself of His enemies and deliver His people? The answer is to be found in the Biblical usage of that term.

### **Biblical Usage of the Word "Coming"**

*Behold, the name of the LORD comes from a remote place; Burning is His anger and dense is His smoke; His lips are filled with indignation. And His tongue is like a consuming fire.*

~~ Isaiah 30:27

The thirtieth chapter of the book of Isaiah is a caution against making an alliance with the Egyptians and a promise that God will personally preserve Judah from the Assyrians. As the passage transitions from the promise of divine protection to a description of God's wrath poured out upon Jerusalem's enemies Isaiah employs the language of visitation or "coming." That the Lord is pictured as "coming" from a remote place is giving voice to the idea that God has been absent, allowing the Assyrians to run amuck in and around Judah, but now He has been aroused and He will come bringing fury and judgment with Him.

In this line of expression the "comings" or visitations of the Lord are seen as being truly awful things. When the Lord comes He comes to bring strength and deliverance for His own people and heap woe and destruction upon His enemies. This apocalyptic employment of the term of "coming" is grounded in the Scriptures from the beginning.

Genesis 49 records the benediction of Jacob upon his sons and of Judah he says,

*The scepter shall not depart from Judah, Nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, Until Shiloh comes, And to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.*

This visitation or coming on the part of Shiloh is seen as being a very significant event; a transition in the seat of power and authority amongst the sons of Jacob. In Moses' benediction upon Israel he uses the exact same language to describe the Lord's protection over the people in the past. In Deuteronomy 33:2 we read,

*The LORD came from Sinai, And dawned on them from Seir; He shone forth from Mount Paran, And He came from the midst of ten thousand holy ones; At His right hand there was flashing lightning for them.*

For the Lord to "come" from Sinai is significant. Moses' day was frequently one of polytheism. All of the various tribes which the Israelites came into contact with had their own unique gods. These pagan peoples were happy to acknowledge the God of Israel as a god but they had no interest in accepting Him as the only God. The Hebrews had very famously been in direct contact with their God at Sinai. But perhaps this God was only the God of the wilderness? Or maybe He only ruled in the mountains? Could it be that His rule was restricted to Mount Sinai alone? For Jehovah to be depicted as "coming" from Sinai to defend His people, regardless of their geographic locale, is a striking testimony to the limitless scope of His rule and dominion. For Moses it does not matter where on this earth men are, they are likely to be visited by Jehovah. Moses expresses this apocalyptic element of God's universal presence with the language of "coming."

Turning to the Psalms the language of coming is enshrined in the worship of Israel. In Psalm 50:3 the psalmist evinces the hope of Israel saying,

*May our God come and not keep silence; Fire devours before Him, And it is very tempestuous around Him.*

Drawing back upon our particular text of study, Revelation 22:20, the apocalyptic petition of John begins to come into clear view when compared with the words of the 50<sup>th</sup> Psalm. We read *"May our God come and not keep silence."* The Psalmist's hope and petition is that God will make Himself known in deliverance for His people and judgment upon His enemies.

In Psalm 96 this hope of Divine visitation is universalized. The concluding section of this Psalm reads,

*Let the field exult, and all that is in it. Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy before the LORD, for He is coming, For He is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness, And the peoples in His faithfulness.*

This Psalm exhorts all men and even the inanimate elements of creation to prepare themselves for the Lord's visitation. He surely comes to judge the world and righteousness and justice are His.

With all of this Old Testament background in mind we may return to the New Testament with a better grasp of what is intended in the expression "come quickly Lord Jesus" but before we do one more point is of the utmost importance.

This apocalyptic hope of the Hebrew people, this confidence in the visitation of the Lord to restore order and justice is not a patient waiting for the end of history. The warning and promise of Isaiah 30 is an imperative command delivered to the people telling them what they could expect from God in their own lifetimes. Moses' benediction of Deuteronomy 33 was speaking about events which had already transpired at the time of his own writing. Psalm 50 is a song of invocation that the Lord will avenge as He has done in the past and while the language of Psalm 96 certainly allows it to be inclusive of a final and ultimate cataclysm of divine apocalypse it is in no way exclusive of the idea expressed in these other passages.

The simple fact is that we cannot, in good conscience of what the original authors intended, claim that all of these references to the coming of the Lord are referring to a hope in judgment deferred until the last day. Rather they are the hopes and prayers of a people who believed that their God, the one true God, visited mankind every day.

For the Hebrews of the Old Testament, and for Christian folk ever since the time of Christ's first advent, Jehovah was a God of constant interaction with His handiwork. The God of the Bible is no clockmaker who set events in motion and then promises to check back in at the last day. On the contrary He is a God who upholds all things by the Word of His power and who visits men constantly; avenging those humble and afflicted in spirit and bringing the haughty to ruin. He it is who "comes with clouds" pouring out vials of wrath upon those who disobey His law and speaking kind words to those who keep His ways.

The petition of "come quickly Lord Jesus" is not a plea that the petitioner may be removed from history; it is a militant expression of the hope that God will avenge even today. For John the final and visible return of Christ in power and judgment is far from an unprecedented event but rather it is the final, ultimate, and physical climax to a series of divine comings that are a trademark of Christ's kingdom of power. For an often afflicted and persecuted people these "visitations" on the part of Christ's kingdom of power are a great comfort and hope.

### **Christ's Teaching Concerning His Coming**

*"For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels." And Jesus was saying to them, "Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power."*

*~~ Mark 8:38-9:1*

Obtuse interpretations of this verse and its several parallels in the other gospel narratives abound but in light of what we have seen up to this point it is difficult to avoid the obvious fact that Christ is here pointing up the fact that He will visit ("come" upon) that very people who then stood before Him with glory and judgment. It is obvious that Christ is indicating that this judgment will befall them before they are allowed to pass away from old age.

If it is true that the consistent usage of the term "come" in the Hebrew Law and Prophets was given to confer the idea of a divine visitation in judgment or a royal display of power (and assuredly this is the case) then it is difficult to understand Christ as intending anything very cryptic by His constant warnings concerning His "coming" upon the people with which He conversed.

Many things Christ communicated in veiled form or in parable but His warnings that judgment was at the door for those who would not repent and believe on His kingdom abound on nearly every page of the gospels.

The thing which trips up so many 21<sup>st</sup> century readers is the assumption that when Christ speaks of His "coming" He must always be talking about His Second Advent; the physical and visible return of Christ at the consummation of human history. Betraying the incorrect nature of this assumption is the fact that Christ speaks about his "coming" throughout His earthly ministry while He is still with the people. Undoubtedly His audience did not grasp the reality of His future death, resurrection, ascension, and session at the right hand of God the Father.

It appears highly doubtful that Christ is teaching in an unclear fashion regarding things yet far distant in the future. The simple truth lies right on the face of the text. In passages such as Mark 8:38-9:1 Christ is not speaking of His post-session Second Advent. He is rather explaining what will be a defining factor of His inter-advental kingdom!

Consider also Matthew 10:23; it says,

*But whenever they persecute you in one city, flee to the next; for truly I say to you, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel until the Son of Man comes.*

Again Christ employs the language of "coming" in a way that would appear descriptive of an event imminent for the Apostles themselves. To tell His disciples that they would not finish the ministerial work in their own homeland before "*the Son of Man comes*" would be a very misleading statement if He were actually talking about something thousands of years off in the distant future. The much more simple explanation is that Christ is here drawing upon the Old Testament idea of "coming" to give comfort to His disciples that He will accompany their earthly ministry with spiritual display of power and glory on the part of His heavenly kingship. The context of Matthew 10:16-23 is certainly one of Christ

promising comfort and strength to His followers and this interpretation renders Matthew 10:23 a close parallel to Matthew 28:18-20.

Another example of Christ's obvious expectation of the imminent nature of His "coming" are His words in Matthew 16:27-28:

*"For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and will then repay every man according to his deeds. Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom."*

Once again we find the words of Christ plainly indicate that He will visit His audience in judgment in their own day. Is Christ teaching that the people would witness His physical Second Advent before the end of the First Century? Obviously no! Paul refutes this exact line of thought in First Thessalonians and Second Timothy; assuring his readers that the end is not upon them.

In order to properly understand Christ's words in all of these New Testament texts we must realize that what He is speaking of is the fact that once He ascended to the right hand of the Father He would not be cut off from the affairs of this earth but would, in fact, be its direct spiritual governor.

As Paul would preach on Mars Hill, the times of ignorance had passed. As the book of Hebrews communicates in its tenth chapter, how swift and sore is the punishment for those who scorn or ignore the Son of God? This recurring teaching of the Apostles, that judgment lies at the door for those who obey not the gospel (2 Thess. 1:8), is rooted in the teaching of both Christ Himself and the Old Testament concerning His invisible, spiritual, and quite frequent comings.

The teaching of Christ in the gospels makes plain that He would "come" in judgment upon the very generation with which He conversed. This expectation of His meshes perfectly with the consistent Biblical employment of the term "coming" to evince the direct, spiritual, and invisible government which God exercises over His creation. That this spiritual government of all things now belongs to Christ, the head of the Church, is the great comfort of the Saints in all ages. Our Lord reigns. May He come swiftly!

### **Implications and Imprecations**

Consistently I observe that due to the misunderstanding pervading modern Christianity on the subject of Christ's coming people often take what has been presented above as an affront or challenge to the idea that Christ will one day make a visible and physical return in judgment to bring history as we know it to its climactic close. Thus it behooves me to not only flatly reject this insinuation but to also go a little farther in pointing out the implications of what has been presented thus far.

It is the plain teaching of the Bible that Christ will one day make a visible and physical return (Acts 1:11, 1 Cor. 15, 1 Thess. 4). The physical return of Christ is also codified in Christianity's most ancient creed. The Apostles Creed says,

*"...He ascended into heaven and sitteth at the right hand of the Father. From thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead."*

The fact that Christ "comes" in a spiritual sense on a constant basis does not challenge the fact that He will one day make a visible appearance. In reality the two doctrines buttress each other. Christ's invisible "comings" are the earnest of His eventual visible return.

Too often the Church in our day is paralyzed by a materialistic worldview that sees all things come to pass as the result of natural causes. God is just a clockmaker observing His creation wind down and Jesus isn't coming back until the clock winds all the way down. This post-enlightenment way of thinking is wrong and it has dramatic effect on the prayer, worship, and expectation of the Church.

If it's true that God isn't really involved directly in human affairs then why pray? And by this measure isn't worship a little goofy? Perhaps or perhaps no but such speculation is a waste of time because the premise is untrue! God is directly involved in the affairs of men. More specifically Christ has ascended on high, led captivity captive, distributes gifts to His Church, and actively executes His office as the King of Power in order to buttress His office as the King of Grace. Christ has the pre-eminence over all things so that He might properly shepherd His Church.

Christ's Church can have the daily comfort of knowing that all men must prepare to meet their King because He coming is (Psalm 96:13, 98:9). Christ will one day make a dramatic and climactic return yes, but that glorious event will not be a radical departure from the course of history. It will rather be the consummation of a series of spiritual and invisible divine comings. Divine comings which have been trademark of Christ's kingdom since the very generation of His ascension to power and glory.

Ramifications flowing downstream from the doctrine of Christ's imminent supernatural government of all things are abounding. Most readily on display is the impact which should be felt in the prayer and worship of the Church.

Far too often the Church engages in worship and prayer which is inherently passive and effeminate. This is in stark contrast from the reality of John's prayer, "come quickly Lord Jesus," which is an invocation of Christ's spiritual coming in judgment and deliverance. John's prayer is uttered against the backdrop of Biblical worship, such as the Psalms, which frequently turns on themes of Divine hatred against the wicked (Psalms 5 and 69), judgment coming unto the enemies of God's people (Psalms 2, 9, 45, 137, 140), and supernatural protection for Christ's Church (Psalms 3, 23, 46, 101).

We previously saw that Moses employed the idea of God's coming when describing the destruction which God poured out upon the enemies of Israel. Isaiah used the same language in reference to the imminent danger which wicked Assyria was in. The Psalms frequently invoke the idea of God coming to judge with equity, avenge His afflicted and punish evil-doers. And Christ Himself warned constantly about the immanent nature of His "coming" to destroy those who would not hearken to His message. Over and over again the true worship ascribed to God in Scripture includes asking God to vindicate His glory and righteousness and calling upon Him to destroy wickedness and those who do wickedness.

Prayer and worship of this nature are referred to as imprecation or imprecatory. The true character of John's closing prayer in the Apocalypse is that of imprecation. He is inviting Jesus to come in deliverance and in judgment.

How often does the Church ask Christ, her master, to come in judgment today? Easy answer: not enough. Is the Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century characterized by asking God to vindicate His holy Name by pouring out wrath upon the wicked? Does the Church engage in worship and prayer which is imprecatory?

Do we as Christians ask Christ to visit this world in spiritual judgment? Do we pray asking Him to destroy His enemies (Psalm 2)? Why not? This is the Biblical example given us.

In closing I readily admit I have done little to open John's Apocalypse at a deeper level. Only one verse has been touched upon. But the example which John leaves for us in Christian imprecation deserves such treatment. In fact it deserves far more! It deserves to be taken up and used by every single church in the world today! Oh that we had a Church that would truly worship before God and lift up prayers worthy of His majesty, His holiness, and His wrath upon wickedness! Oh that we had a Church which could truly invoke, *Come quickly Lord Jesus*.