

Dr. Dave Mathewson, Where is His Coming?

Session 4, Delay of the Parousia in the General Epistles and Revelation

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This is Dr. David Mathewson in his teaching on the question, Where Is His Coming? Session 4, Delay of the Parousia in the General Epistles and Revelation.

So, we've been looking at the section in the New Testament, often labeled the general epistles, and we spent quite a bit of time in the last session on 2 Peter 3, which is a little bit different passage from some of the others we've been looking at. Most of the texts are ones that seem to anticipate the soon return of Christ, or the return of Christ that could be taken within the lifetime of the authors, or Jesus, and the first century listeners and readers.

But we looked at 2 Peter 3 because it addresses, instead of the issue of soonness, it addresses the issue of delay. And that is, why hasn't Christ come back? And so the problem of delay is not a modern one, but already towards the end of the first century, in the first century, the issue of delay was already causing issues. And so 2 Peter addresses false teachers and a series of questions that they raised as to why Christ had not come back.

Where is the promise of his coming? And we saw that 2 Peter 3 answers that by saying, number one, that God does not see delay from the same standpoint that we do. We see delay from the standpoint of our limited, finite human perspective and lifespan of roughly 60, 70, 80 years or so, where God sees time in its entirety from beginning to end. So, what appears to be an intolerable delay for us is not for him.

And then we saw that God also delays giving humanity a chance to repent. So that's probably the fullest response to and theological rationale for delay in the New Testament. Now, there are a number of other texts that we could look at in the general epistles, Hebrews through 3 John, and we'll look at Revelation by itself.

But we'll examine three texts in particular from the general epistles, James 5:8, and 1 Peter 4:7, and then 1 John 2:17, and 18. Another text we could look at is Hebrews 10:25, and there are a handful of others, but we'll focus on those three texts. So first of all, James 5:8. James 5:8 is a call for Christians to be patient because the coming, or the Greek word is parousia, the coming of the Lord is near or is drawing near.

This text takes place or is found within a broader context in James 5:1 through 11 of poor day laborers who are crying out for justice and who are because they're suffering at the hands of oppressive, wealthy landowners who are withholding their

wages. And when you read 5:1 through 11, it kind of sets that scene for you. And James' command to these suffering day laborers, these poor Christians, is that first of all, they wait until the coming, or again, the parousia, that Greek word parousia, of the Lord.

And he reminds them that the Lord's coming is near. He uses the language of the judges standing at the door, also a spatial image, not just a temporal one, but a spatial one, that the coming is near spatially and ready to break in at any moment. And so we can once more ask, in what sense is the Lord's coming near in James chapter 5 and verse 8? In what sense is Jesus about to break into history and bring about judgment of the wealthy oppressors? Was James wrong? Was he predicting that this would happen within his lifetime, and then he was wrong? Was he mistaken? I do think, although a couple have suggested, that James is actually referring to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, and certainly that is a possibility, and that would alleviate the problem of James predicting the second coming or the end of the world, and it never came about.

I think, more likely, James' language of Jesus standing at the door in the parousia language and coming as a judge refers to what theologians call the second coming of Christ. So, James seems to be referring to the need for the readers to wait patiently because Jesus' second coming, again, that's not language James uses, second coming, but that is our theological terminology that distinguishes that from the first coming of Jesus at his birth and death and resurrection, but the second coming of Christ to bring about judgment, and especially in this context, the judgment of those wicked oppressors. In what sense, then, was Jesus coming near? Just very briefly, I think all we need to say, or all I want to say, is that we should probably read James from the same perspective that we have the other New Testament authors, that at Christ's first coming, he's already inaugurated the end times.

The end has already been inaugurated with the first coming of Christ as death and resurrection. We saw in the Gospels that Jesus already inaugurated the end-time kingdom of God promised by the Old Testament prophets, and so his second coming could occur at any time to bring that period of end time to a conclusion. So, like Paul and like other New Testament authors, James and his readers live with the expectation that Christ could come back very soon.

Christ could come back at any time because they're already in the end, and all they are waiting for is the wrap-up of that end when Christ comes as judge. So, Christ is coming and standing at the door already, both temporally and spatially, and so waiting to break into history so his readers are called upon to respond in patience. Christ could come back at any time to bring about judgment, so the readers shouldn't try to take revenge, and instead, they should wait patiently for the Lord's coming.

So, to summarize James chapter 5, number one, James is operating within this same tension between what has already taken place and what has not yet come. The end has already been inaugurated, and so, therefore, Christ's second coming could occur at any time. It is soon.

And then second, James uses that as a motivation for godly living, not to predict the end, not to predict that Jesus is going to return in their lifetime, and then he was mistaken. However, James uses the soon return of Christ, the fact that Christ could come back at any time, as an ethical motivation for his readers to live holy lives responsibly. In this case, waiting patiently, not taking revenge on their oppressors, and waiting patiently for Christ the judge to break into history and bring about justice.

The next text that we want to look at just very briefly is 1 Peter 4:7, where in 1 Peter 4:7, Peter utters the words, the time is, or the end of all things is near. And again, that sounds, at first glance, that sounds like a prediction of the end. Was Peter predicting the end, and then he was mistaken? Was Peter predicting that Jesus was coming back within his lifetime and his reader's lifetime, but then he was completely mistaken? To simply summarize briefly, first of all, I think much like James 5.8, and much like Paul's letters, and even many of Jesus' statements of his soon return, is we need to understand 1 Peter from the same perspective as other New Testament authors.

They expected the soon return of Christ. They expected that Christ could come back at any time because he had already inaugurated the end times. They were already in the end.

They had already been living in the last few days. They were already to look at time from the compressed perspective that Paul talked about back in 1 Corinthians 7. And so, from that perspective, Christ could come back at any time. They needed to see time from the fact that the end time could wrap up at any moment with the second coming of Christ.

But Peter falls short of predicting when that will take place or that it has to take place in his lifetime or in the lifetime of his readers. And then second, like James 5 and Paul and other New Testament authors, Peter draws on this perspective of the soon return of Christ, the fact that Christ could come back at any time, to instill ethical urgency within his readers, not to predict the end, not to predict that Christ indeed will come back in their lifetime, and then Peter was mistaken. But instead, his readers have no other option but to always remain alert.

If they don't know when Christ is coming back if Christ could come back at any moment, then they have no other option but to remain alert and to remain vigilant by living godly and holy lives in the context in which they find themselves. If the

readers knew that Christ was going to come back tomorrow, or if they knew for a fact that he was going to delay 10, 20, 100 years, 1,000 years, or 2,000 years, they obviously would have planned their lives accordingly. But since they don't know, since Christ could come back at any time, to use James' imagery, since he's already standing at the door, that means that the readers must respond in urgency to live the kind of lives that Peter enjoins them to and asks them to throughout the entire letter.

So once more, 1 Peter 4.7, although in the face it might appear to indicate that Peter thought the end was going to occur in his lifetime when he says the end of all things is near, he's simply reflecting that same perspective that other New Testament authors do of already living in the end and expecting that Christ could come back at any time, not predicting that he will or predicting when he will come back. The next text that I want to look at very briefly before we move on to the book of Revelation is 1 John 2.18, and I'll read both verses 17 and 18. In 1 John, we read these words, And the world with its lust is passing away, but the one who does the will of God remains forever.

And then, in verse 18, Children, it is the last hour. And as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now, many Antichrists have come. By this, we know that it is the last hour.

To kind of summarize that last verse, a little bit is noticed that John is convinced that the end times have already arrived. I don't want to go into detail as to who the Antichrist is and what John thinks it might be, but notice that he sees the Antichrist as somebody or something that has to come in the future, yet he's convinced it's already, many Antichrists have already come demonstrating that the end has already taken place. John, instead of using the language of the end of all things or last days or something like that, or the parousia of Christ, John uses the language of the last hour. So, most likely, the last hour refers to the end times that have already been inaugurated with the first coming of Christ.

John is convinced they already live in the last hour. They already live in the last times, demonstrated by the fact that many Antichrists were opposition to Christ and probably in the form of false teaching in John's day, the fact that there were false teachers proclaiming a different gospel and undermining the true gospel of Jesus Christ, opposing Jesus Christ and his people was a demonstration or proof that the end times, that last hour, had already begun in the same way that Jesus said the kingdom of God has already begun, even in advance of its final future manifestation. So, the last hour has already begun.

John and his readers were already living in the end times, and that's why, therefore, John can say the world and its desires are passing away. Why? Because the end-time kingdom has already arrived. The end times were, again, in the Old Testament, the

end times meant the dissolution of this order, the destruction of this order, and Christ's enemies would take place to make way for a new creation.

Now, John sees that the process is already happening because the last hour has arrived, the end time predicted by the Old Testament prophets. Because the last hour is already here, that must mean that this present world, full of evil, deception, and sin, is now in the process of passing away. You'll notice John does not say how long this will take place by saying we're in the last hour.

He does not indicate how close the end is to the final end. He does not predict when Christ is going to come back. He does not predict how long that last hour is going to continue.

All that he knows is that because of the first coming of Christ, with Christ's first coming, his death, and his resurrection, that last hour, those end times, the end of all things, has already arrived. And all that he awaits is the not yet part of that, the second coming of Christ to bring history to its conclusion. And notice once more, like other New Testament authors, that John uses this perspective for ethical urgency.

If you read the surrounding verses, he's calling on his readers to respond appropriately, to avoid deception, to avoid the false teachers, to live holy lives. You read the rest of the whole book of 1 John, he asks them to love one another and to follow Jesus' commandments and things like that. So, John is not interested in predicting the end.

John is not a modern-day prophecy guru who reads the signs and predicts how close the end is and when Jesus is going to return. But instead, John uses this perspective of the soon return of Christ and the fact that they're already in the end, the last hour, which means that this present world must be passing away. He uses that to help them avoid the desires of this world and those things that the world values.

So once more, there is nothing in the general epistles, and there are other texts we could have looked at. I've simply focused on three that I think are representative of this kind of perspective. I think it's this kind of explanation in these three texts that explains others as well.

But nothing in these passages supports a failed prediction. I don't think that John or James or the author of Hebrews or Peter are predicting an end that never came, and therefore, they were mistaken, they were wrong, and they had to adjust their perspective or something like that. But instead, all of them are looking at the time and their present-day from the perspective of inaugurated eschatology.

That is, the end times have already been inaugurated. They're already in the end. They're already in the last hour.

This present world is already passing away. And that should shape their perspective ethically and morally. That should give them urgency in how they live their lives.

Because they're already in the end, Christ could come back at any moment. Not that he has to. The authors don't predict he will.

And then they were wrong. But Christ could come back at any time. That perspective must dictate how the biblical authors and their readers look at the world, how they respond, and how they live their lives.

So, we've looked at the Gospels, and we've seen that nothing that Jesus says would, in my view, support the opinion that Jesus thought that the end-time kingdom would arrive within his lifetime. And then he was mistaken. He was wrong.

We saw that in a number of texts, Jesus probably wasn't referring to the end-time kingdom but was referring to the inauguration of the kingdom. But even when he does refer to his soon return in the end-time kingdom, that's just because since the end had already been inaugurated, the end times had already been inaugurated with Jesus' ministry. Since the end time kingdom was already a present reality, its wrap-up could occur at any time.

So that Jesus could promise that he would come soon without predicting when he would return. We saw the same perspective in Acts and Paul's writings. There was nothing in those texts that would support that Paul predicted the end and, therefore, was mistaken.

But like Jesus, he saw time from a different perspective. The end times had already been inaugurated. He was already living in the end, so Christ could come back at any time to wrap that up.

And he saw time as now compressed and shortened so that there's an urgency to live life responsibly. But we also saw that, even more so than in a couple of texts, such as the book of Acts, the entire plan of Acts, and 2 Thessalonians, the New Testament indicated that there could be some delay. The New Testament made provisions for the delay, so it is unlikely that the New Testament authors were predicting that Christ would come back immediately; therefore, they were mistaken.

And then we saw in the general epistles that exact same perspective, that James and Peter and John thought they were already and knew that they were already living in the end times. The end had already been inaugurated. Therefore, they also lived with that expectation of the soon return of Christ.

Jesus could come back at any moment, and therefore, there was an ethical urgency. They had to order their lives appropriately in light of that perspective since they simply did not know when Christ would return. That brings us then to the book of Revelation.

Now, Revelation is a book often known as a book about eschatology and end times stuff. I think it's certainly more than that. But Revelation does deal with the wrap-up of God's redemptive plan for all creation, for all humanity.

So, it should play a role in our discussion. And I think when you look at it, indeed it does. Revelation contributes to our understanding of the delay of the parousia.

So, I want to take a little bit of time exploring the book of Revelation in the rest of this lecture and then finish it up in the next one. But before we do, it's important to understand what kind of book Revelation is. It's different than the other books we've looked at.

Revelation belongs to a unique type of literature that we really don't have close parallels to today. Revelation is known as an apocalypse. By that, we mean not merely the end of the world, the decimation of civilization, and things like that.

But an apocalypse was a kind of literature. It recorded John's vision. John had a vision of heaven.

He had a vision of the future. He had a vision of his own present day. But that vision is communicated in highly symbolic language.

So, when you read the book of Revelation, you find that it's full of locusts with human heads and the tail of a scorpion. It's kind of half human and half animal, insect-like, and kind of bizarre. It's a book full of seven-headed dragons and things like that.

What is going on? Well, John is referring to actual events in his own day and in the future, but he casts them, or he refers to them through this vision. He refers to them with highly symbolic language. For example, I'm convinced that John and the first readers would have understood the beasts in Revelation 13, for example, as referring to the Roman Empire, the emperor and the Roman Empire, and those who were keen to promote the worship of the emperor.

John's trying to get his readers to avoid that. One of the ways he does that is by portraying Rome in its true colors. It's actually, Rome is actually a hideous seven-headed beast that is meant to harm you, that is opposed to everything that God is trying to do within his people and in his world.

And so, the readers should perhaps sit back and think again about whether they want to support Rome and throw in their lot by showing allegiance and obedience to the Roman Empire. So that's kind of how Revelation works. It's a vision in highly symbolic language.

So, when we look at what Revelation says about the end and the coming of Christ, it's important to realize what kind of book we're dealing with. It's also a prophecy. By calling Revelation a prophecy, we don't mean that it just predicts the end.

It's not like John's looking into a crystal ball, and he sees the 21st century, and then he goes back and tries to explain it the best he can to his readers. A lot of Old Testament scholars like to distinguish between prophecy as foretelling and forth-telling. Foretelling is predicting the future, but forth-telling is simply announcing or proclaiming a message immediately to the audience who is reading this, who is listening to this.

And most scholars are convinced that prophecy in the Old Testament and New Testament contains far, far more forth-telling. That is, it's not so much concerned to predict the future as much as to call God's people in the present to faithfulness and renewed covenant faithfulness with God through obedience. So, when we look at Revelation as a prophecy, we're more interested not so much in whether it's predicting the future.

Revelation does, especially when you get to the last few chapters of the book. John is at the very end of history, the second coming of Christ, I think. But even then, the purpose of that is not just to give us a detailed timeline of what the end times is going to look like and to satisfy our curiosity for when Christ is going to come back and what will happen and what that will look like. But even then, John is still engaged in forth-telling.

He is communicating a message to his readers. He calls them to be faithful to Jesus Christ, even when he refers to the future. I'm convinced, too, that John and his readers would have understood what was going on in this book.

This is very important because Revelation is not just referring to events that all of a sudden we can figure out, and John and his readers had no idea what was going on. I just recently had someone tell me that the book of Revelation was written to confuse its original readers, and now we understand it. And I basically said, actually just the opposite is true.

If anyone is confused about the book, it's us. Not because it's a confusing book, but because it was meant to be understood by the first readers. In chapter 1 and verse 3, John calls on his readers to pronounce a blessing for those who read it and keep it, the whole book.

My response is, how could John expect his readers to keep and obey? By keeping it, he means to obey it. How could John expect his readers to obey a book they had no idea what it was about? That would be deceptive and counter to what John was trying to do, at the least. And then, at the end of the book, in chapter 22 and verse 10, John is told not to seal the book up because the time is at hand.

To seal a book up meant to hide its contents for a later date, but John's told just the opposite, don't seal it up. So, this is a book that is relevant to the readers. This is a book that they could understand in the first century.

This is a book comprehensible to first-century readers. It was meant to communicate a message that would help them to understand what was going on in the first century, living life in the Roman Empire, and how they should respond to it is meant to help them make sense of their world. So, from that perspective, what does it say about the issue of the soon return of Christ and the possibility of delay? Well, we find a number of statements, interestingly, in the very beginning of the book and at the very end of the book that I want to spend just a little bit of time looking at.

In chapter one, in the very introduction of the book, you, I think, find a number of signals or clues as to how John wants the book to be received and read by his first readers, but obviously, in the 21st century and its readers as well. In Revelation chapter one, verse one, we read the revelation of Jesus Christ that God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. And then, in verse three that we just referred to, blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear the words of this prophecy and keep what is written in it because the time is near.

So, these statements probably refer to the entire book, not just, you know, one or two sections, but the entire book of Revelation, which includes references towards the end of the book, especially chapters 19 through 22, references to events that will take place at the end of history, at the second coming of Christ, I think. And so, we can ask the question, in what sense are the contents of Revelation near? In what sense are they going to take place soon? And then, if you go to the very end of the book, in chapter 22, after the vision of the new creation in the new Jerusalem, we find more kind of final instructions on reading the book and responding to the book after the vision that John has. In chapter 22 and verse seven, Jesus himself begins to speak at the end of the book.

And he says, look, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book, which is kind of what we read in chapter one. So, Jesus, look, I am coming soon.

Then, in verse 12, he repeats, " look, I am coming soon, and my reward is with me. And then, finally, at the very end of the book, in verse 20, Jesus speaks once again; John introduces him by saying that he who testifies about these things says, yes, I am coming soon. So, three times at the end of the book, Jesus promises that he is coming soon.

So, you have these statements that the contents of the book are near, that they're about to happen soon, things that are going to happen soon. And then it ends with at least three times, Jesus promising that he is coming soon. So certainly, John thought the end was going to happen, the end of the world, and the coming of Christ would happen within his lifetime, within the first century.

But 2000 years later, here we still are. So obviously John was mistaken. John himself and presumably his readers passed from the scene within the next century and John was mistaken.

However, I think we need to look again at how we understand these statements in the context of revelation and what's going on in the context of the kind of literature it is. How should we understand these statements about the soonness and nearness of these events and the promises of the soon return of Christ? One way to look at it would be with a similar explanation to some of the other soonness texts or texts that seem to promise the return of Christ in the rest of the New Testament and that is that John is actually referring to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Now this isn't entirely possible.

I think it is accurate to see much of Revelation, again not predicting some far-off future way in the distant horizon, beyond the horizon of the first-century readers like the 20th, 21st century, or later, but that the book is relevant and is referring to events already taking place within the lifetime of the readers. Now, obviously, to take this as a reference to events in 70 AD has two issues with it. Number one, it assumes that revelation was written quite early during the reign of Nero, sometime in the 60s, because it would have had to have been written before Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 AD.

So, it assumes an earlier date to revelation. Without going into an argument, I think the more popular consensus among scholars is correct that revelation was probably written later than that, perhaps within the lifetime of the emperor Domitian, that is, towards the end of the first century, 95 to 96 AD, the most common solution. So most likely revelation was written after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

So, it is unlikely, if that is the case, that John in saying, I am coming soon, is referring to the destruction of Jerusalem in 80 AD. The other thing is when you look at chapters 19 through 22 and a couple of other places in Revelation, they seem to me more naturally to describe the second coming of Christ, not his coming and judgment

on Jerusalem. So, I am not convinced that the view that Revelations, all of these texts that refer to nearness and soonness are referring to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

They do refer to events that, because the end time has already been inaugurated, there are events that are already happening in the first century and are not about to happen. In that sense, those events are soon. But it also refers to the second coming of Christ, events that we read about, particularly in chapters 19 and 22.

In what sense are those soon? Some have solved this by saying that the language, the word soon, could be translated quickly. And the idea is not that Christ is going to come back immediately, but when he does come back, it will take place quickly. That is possible as well.

Though I think that the Greek word that is translated soon, or could be translated quickly, is better translated soon. To me, it just would not make sense to say, is John emphasizing that Jesus is going to come back quickly instead of coming back slowly, which would be the opposite of that. It just seems to me that the language of soonness is a better translation, which most English translations follow that way of translating this Greek word.

So, I think Revelation is promising that these events, including the second coming of Christ, are soon, especially in chapter 22, verses 7, 12, and 20, where Christ himself says, I am coming soon, that soon is the correct translation. So, what's the other option? I think it's worth taking these verses as actually promising that Christ is going to come back soon. That is, John is, I think, sharing the same perspective we've seen in the other New Testament authors.

With Jesus himself in the Gospels, with Paul anticipating the soon return of Christ, with James and Peter and John in 1 John, all of them looked at the time from the perspective and understood that they were already living in the end. They were already in the end times because the first coming of Christ had inaugurated the end. The death and resurrection of Jesus had already inaugurated the end times, so John was convinced he was already living in the end.

So, he could say things like, the time is near, these things are soon, they're already beginning to happen, and the only thing left is for the final consummation to break into history and bring things to their consummation. So, Christ could come back at any time. His coming was indeed soon.

So, it's important then to understand that John and Jesus' statements, for example, in chapter 22, are not predictions of the end. They do not predict the end, and then they are mistaken and wrong. Instead, they're sharing the same perspective we've seen throughout the rest of the New Testament, that the end had already been

inaugurated and, therefore, its wrap-up and conclusion could take place very soon, even within John and the reader's lifetime, without John predicting that it necessarily will happen that way.

We're going to see in a moment that this perspective is balanced in Revelation with another one that is crucial for understanding this issue and understanding the book. The other thing to recognize is that, like other New Testament authors, John uses this perspective to instill ethical urgency in his readers. Again, John is not interested in predicting the end times or how close they might be to the end.

John uses this perspective of the soon return of Christ to instill ethical urgency in his readers. Readers living in the context of the Roman Empire, readers who are tempted to compromise their faith in Jesus Christ and show allegiance to Rome, John is trying to get them to resist that, to follow Jesus Christ in obedience, to worship only God and the Lamb, no matter what the consequences. And part of the urgency is they're already living in the end.

The end has already been inaugurated, so Christ could come back to wrap that up and bring that to its conclusion at any time. It could be soon. It could be within their lifetime.

And so, there's an urgency for them to resist the temptation to compromise and instead respond in obedience to God and the Lamb, no matter what the consequences it brings. And so that's far more important than any attempts to try to predict how close the end is or whether they are actually living in the last generation. That's not John's concern at all.

So once more, these statements, at least in the bookends of Revelation, chapter one and chapter 22, that frame the entire vision, indicate that those events in that vision are not to be seen as something John is predicting that the end is going to come right away and then he was mistaken and wrong. Instead, they are meant to indicate that those events are there to instill urgency in the readers to live life responsibly because they're already in the end. They already see these things beginning to be fulfilled.

And one day, we'll come to a conclusion with the second coming of Christ that could even take place in their lifetime, but they simply don't know. We'll see that again, Revelation is going to balance this perspective out with another one that we'll look at in just a moment. So, John does not predict that the end will come in his lifetime.

Christ is going to come back in his lifetime, and then poor John was mistaken. But John doesn't seem, I don't think, interested at all in predicting when the end is going to come back as much as reminding his readers of how they need to look at their situation and how they need to see time from the perspective of the fact that they're already in the end and then to live life appropriately and to respond in a responsible

way by following Jesus no matter what it costs them. A couple of other passages I'd like to in Revelation related to this theme that I want to look at just very briefly are found in chapters two and three in the seven letters or seven messages more accurately to the seven historical churches that John is addressing in the book of Revelation.

In chapters two and three, we find a number of statements that also seem to refer to the soon return of Christ that likewise could be taken as predictions of John that Christ was going to come back within the lifetime of these seven churches and then, of course, John was mistaken because Jesus did not come back. So, was John in error? For example, in Revelation chapter two and verse 16, the letter to the church at Pergamum, he says, in the same way I'm reading verse 15, in the same way you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. So, repent otherwise I will come to you quickly or soon and fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

Notice this language of Christ coming to them soon to this historical church in Pergamum. Chapter three and verse 11, I'll read that one as well. Chapter three and verse 11, the letter to the church at Philadelphia.

Jesus says, I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have so that no one takes your crown. The first one, chapter two, verse 16, is John predicting an end that never came? Well, when he promises that Christ is coming sooner, John is actually quoting Jesus' words.

So, in John quoting Jesus' words that Christ is coming soon, what is he predicting? There are a couple of options for understanding both of these verses. Number one is that both of these verses may refer to Christ coming to the church in judgment in history. That is actually in the first century, not that he visibly showed up, but Christ coming in judgment on the church and bringing judgment upon them because of their failure to repent their lack of obedience and their unfaithfulness.

That especially seems to fit chapter two and verse 16, when he tells them to repent because he's going to come and fight against the Nicolaitans, whoever they are, probably a group that is tempting the church to compromise with Rome and saying, well, you can be faithful to Jesus Christ and faithful to the Roman Empire at the same time. And now Jesus promises to come in judgment with the sword that comes out of his mouth. So, it's possible that chapter two, verse 16 is indeed referring to Christ coming to the church historically and bringing judgment upon them because of their failure to take a stand against Rome and just refuse to compromise and to follow Jesus Christ alone and to listen to the Nicolaitans, this group that is promoting compromise.

Chapter three, verse 11, I think, is a little more difficult to limit to the first century. It reflects the exact same language you find at the end of chapter 22, where in chapter

22 verses 7, 12, and 20, Christ himself promises, I am coming soon. Now in chapter three, verse 11, you see that same language.

I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have so that no one takes your crown. Probably a reference to the end-time reward that God will bring to his people.

In fact, the very next verse, verse 12 of chapter three, the one who conquers, I will make a pillar in the temple of my God, which is a reference to chapter 21 of Revelation, the new creation, new Jerusalem vision. So, probably, verse 11 is referring to the end time, the second coming of Jesus Christ at the end of history. But is John predicting an end that never came, and therefore, he was wrong? No.

Instead, I think we simply then need to understand this verse in the same way we understood those verses in chapter 22 and verse 7, 12, and 20 and the other references to soonness or nearness throughout the book of Revelation. Once more, this assumes that perspective of the fact that John and his readers were already living in the end, so they expected Christ to come back soon. He could come back at any time.

Not that John is saying he necessarily will. John is not predicting that Christ will come back in their lifetime, but reflecting the fact that he certainly could at any moment and come back soon because they are already living in the time of the end. And once more, both of these texts, no matter how we take them, whether they're referring to Christ coming in the first century in judgment or coming at the end of history in his second coming, which I think at least chapter three, verse 11 should be taken that way.

Whatever the issue is, we also have to realize both of these are in the context of ethical exhortation. Again, John is not trying to predict for his readers how close they are to the end. He's not interested in predicting when Christ is going to come back.

But once more, he's trying to get these churches to refuse to compromise with Rome and to follow Christ and the Lamb in obedience, no matter what the consequences it might bring. One other verse we could look at is chapter two and verse 25, where the language is a little bit different, but now, in the letter to the church at Thyatira, he says, only hold on to what you have until I come. If you back up and read verse 24, John recording Jesus' words to them, says, I say to the rest of you in Thyatira who do not hold to this teaching, who haven't known the so-called secrets of Satan.

Again, the teaching is probably that they can compromise with Rome. They can obey Rome and still maintain their faithfulness to Jesus Christ. And now John singles out some in Thyatira that have not given into that.

And now he tells them in verse 25, hold on to what you have until I come. Now, is that a reference again to the second coming of Christ? Is that a reference to Christ coming in judgment in the first century upon Thyatira and those who are unfaithful? Again, either of those, I think, is preferable to taking this as a failed prediction. But if it is referring to the second coming of Christ, then once more, I think we need to take it from the same perspective as the other text that promised the soon return of Christ to his church.

And that is, Jesus could come back at any time. Since they're already living in the end times, there is a soon, an expectation of the soon return of Christ. Christ could come back at any time to bring to an end history and judge, bring judgment, but bring reward to his people who are faithful.

So, in conclusion with these texts and Revelation, I think we can see that John does live with the expectation that Christ could come back at any time. John does live with the expectation of the soon return of Christ because he's already living in the end. The end has already been inaugurated.

God's people are already a kingdom of priests in advance of the day when they will be his kingdom of priests in the new creation in Revelation 21 and 22. The end has already arrived. Christ is already ruling as king in advance of that final day.

So, they're already living in the end and they simply await the coming of Christ to bring history to its consummation and to bring the not yet, the final judgment and salvation that they're expecting. From that perspective, John can say that Christ is coming soon. He could come back at any time.

And they need to live in that perspective. They need to be prepared for that by living faithfully, by following Jesus Christ and maintaining their faithful witness for the person of Jesus Christ and refusing to compromise with Rome. John is not interested in predicting the end.

John is not interested in, like some of our modern-day prophecy preachers, predicting when Christ will come back or how near his coming is or how soon he'll come back. But simply that Christ will come back and that they're already living in the end and Christ could come back at any time and that should motivate God's people to refuse to compromise with the world and its evil system and instead to maintain their faithfulness to Jesus Christ no matter what the consequences it might bring. So I think from that perspective then, Revelation shares the same perspective with other New Testament texts on the soonness or nearness of the coming of Christ.

Now, what we'll do in the next and final lecture is pick up another theme or another thread in the book of Revelation that kind of balances this one out. If we've looked at a number of texts that indicate the soonness or nearness of Christ's coming and

these events in Revelation, there are a number of other texts that seem to emphasize the possibility of delay that balance out the emphasis on imminence. So we're going to see both imminence and delay.

We've seen the theme of delay in other New Testament texts like 2 Peter, a little bit in 2 Thessalonians, even one of Jesus' parables, the parable of the 10 maidens back in Matthew 25. But Revelation is going to emphasize even more the possibility of delay that makes it even further unlikely that John is predicting an end and then was mistaken. And then we'll wrap up our discussion with just making a few brief comments on some theological and pastoral implications of the delay of the parousia in some of the New Testament texts that we've looked at.