

Dr. Dave Mathewson, Where Is His Coming?

Session 5, Delay of the Parousia in Revelation and the Theological and Pastoral Implications

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This is Dr. David Mathewson in his teaching on the question, Where Is His Coming? Session 5, Delay of the Parousia in Revelation and the Theological and Pastoral Implications.

So in our last lecture, we looked at the book of Revelation from the perspective of its emphasis on soonness. And there are a number of references in Revelation that seem to lead us to believe that John thought Jesus Christ was coming back immediately.

From the very beginning, especially the book ends, in chapters 1 and 22, where there's a reference to these things happening soon, or these things are near, to the very end of the book in chapter 22, where Christ promises himself that he's coming soon. We saw that we should probably understand those statements from the same perspective as other statements in the New Testament by New Testament authors, including Jesus himself, Jesus' own statements in the Gospels that anticipate the nearness or soonness of the return of Christ. What I want to do now is kind of shift our perspective and look at another strand in Revelation that is usually missed when we jump on those texts that indicate soonness and nearness, and sometimes I think inappropriately and wrongly use those to conclude that John was predicting the end and it never came and therefore he was mistaken.

And that is why Revelation also emphasizes delay. There are a couple of texts in particular, but we'll see that even in the entire structure of Revelation, there's a delay built into it that stands alongside the emphasis on imminence or nearness or soonness. You also get a strand of delay.

Now, one conclusion, I guess, would be that John was not that smart and didn't realize what he was doing and contradicted himself. I seriously doubt that's the case. I, in fact, think that John is being intentional, that since he simply did not know when Christ was going to come back, he emphasizes both the themes of nearness or soonness and delay, the theme of immanency and delay in the coming of Christ.

So, let's look at some of these passages. The first one, the first stopping point, and probably the clearest and most extensive passage on delay, is found in Revelation chapter six and verses nine through 11. And I'll read those in just a moment, but this is actually the fifth seal in the first series of seven judgments.

There's a three series-of seven judgments. The first one is the seven seals, the next one is the seven trumpets, and finally, the seven bowls. Those come in chapters eight and nine, the trumpets, and then the bowls in chapter 16.

These are the first set of seven judgments in the form of seals. And if you back up chapter five, in chapter five, we find that the lamb takes the scroll. God, who is seated on the throne, has a scroll in his hand.

The scroll probably reveals God's plan for bringing about judgment and salvation to the world, bringing about his plan for redemption. And now the lamb is found, the only one in chapter five that is worthy of opening the scroll. The scroll has seven seals on it, according to chapter five.

And now we find those seals beginning to be unleashed. And as each seal is taken off the scroll, something happens. And the fifth seal, here's what happens.

Chapter six, nine through 11, when he, that is the lamb who took the scroll in chapter five, because he's the only one worthy to do so. When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who've been slaughtered because of the word of God and the testimony they had been given. So John sees the souls of those who have been martyred because of their faithfulness.

Remember, we said that one of the problems that Revelation is addressing is the problem of compromise. Some had been faithful, and some who will be faithful face the prospect of martyrdom, that is, losing their life for their faith. They cried out, verse 10, they cried out with a loud voice, Lord, the one who is holy and true, how long until you judge those who live in the earth and avenge our blood? So they were each given a white robe, and they were told to rest a little while longer until the number would be completed of their fellow servants and their brothers and sisters who were going to be killed for their faith, just as they had.

Now, a couple of observations to make: notice this language of how long, oh Lord, this actually reflects a number of Old Testament texts found in the Psalms and the prophets. So, the issue of how long this is going to go on is not new for John. This is an issue that has its roots all the way back in the Old Testament with the old covenant people of God.

So, it's not a new one for John and his readers. This cry, how long, oh Lord, demonstrates a couple of things. Number one, it's a desire for vindication for those who are suffering at the hands of their oppressors, for those that John sees as losing their lives because of their faithfulness to Jesus Christ and refusal to compromise.

This is a cry for God to intervene and for vindication. This cry of how long is also an indication of delay. It's also an indication that things have gone on longer than they expected.

They perhaps thought Christ, God would vindicate them sooner than he had. So, this cry, how long, also demonstrates that there's been some delay, that they expected that God would vindicate them sooner than they had. There's also an element of soonness and imminency, even in this indication of delay, when they're told to wait a little while longer.

That is, it's not going to last forever. Christ is going to come back and vindicate them. So, there is an element of imminency, but the emphasis is certainly on delay.

Notice, especially verse 11, it goes on, and John tells his readers, so they were each given a white robe, and they were told to rest a little while longer. So again, this isn't going to last forever. There is an element of imminency until the number would be completed of their fellow servants and their brothers and sisters who were going to be killed just as they had.

This idea or this notion of a predetermined number that would have to take place before the end is one that's found in apocalyptic texts. We said Revelation is an apocalypse. That is, it's a record of a vision that John had cast in highly symbolic language.

There are a number of other apocalypses written roughly during this time period of 200 BC to AD 200 that are not in the Old or New Testament. But a number of them, for example, 1st Enoch, a text in a book known as 4th Ezra, and another one in 2nd Baruch use this image of a set number that had to be filled up before the end came. Now, whether John actually knew what the number was or he thought there was a literal number, he's using this image, I think, to communicate this idea of delay.

He's providing an explanation of delay. But more importantly, he's showing there is going to be a delay. Christ may not come back immediately.

The saints are told that they might have to wait for a little while longer. John doesn't tell us how long they're going to have to wait. He certainly doesn't say it's going to go on for 2,000 years or longer.

He's simply convinced that there may be a period of delay and that God's people may have to wait before they experience vindication before Christ returns as judge and brings an end to their suffering and brings about vindication for what they had suffered, especially those who have died. They and I are waiting for their enemies to be judged. And we do see that happens at the end of the book of Revelation.

But John is now telling them, you may have to wait. He describes it as a little while. So, the image is that it's not going to last forever.

So, there is some imminency. But the emphasis on this seal is that of delay. But there's an assurance that Jesus is going to come back and judge and avenge them from their enemies.

But that might entail a period of delay. And so, once more, it's a call for God's people to be faithful. It's a call for, in this case, a call for them to be patient.

So, the image is not so much one of soonness, because Christ is going to come back soon. But now, because there might be a period of delay before God intervenes and vindicates his people, that calls on them to be patient. And that calls on them to be vigilant and live responsibly.

So, the fifth seal in chapter six, clearly indicates that John thinks there could be a period of delay. Again, John doesn't tell us how long the delay might be. He does not predict how long that might go on.

Certainly, he doesn't see 2,000 years. It allows for that. John just doesn't say how long the delay might take place, but simply that there might be a delay that calls upon God's people to be patient.

Much like we saw in James chapter five, the call for them to be patient, for the coming of Christ to avenge them from their oppressors. Now, here, John puts it more in the context of a possible delay that calls on God's people to exemplify patience. So, the fifth seal is the first indication of delay.

The other aspect of Revelation is not so much wrapped up in one specific text; the other aspect of Revelation's indication of delay is more wrapped up in the structure of the book and how it's put together in a number of places. And that is, Revelation, from a literary standpoint, frequently will bring the reader to an end or heighten the expectation of the end only to back off and kind of start over. So, it's interesting that Revelation's structure is not so much just easily progresses linearly; it almost progresses cyclically, where the author brings you to the end or at least to the brink of the end, then he'll back off, then he'll do it again, and he'll back off.

So, there are kinds of stops and starts and starts and stops and delays built into Revelation's structure. So, the literary structure of Revelation corresponds to the theological tension between imminence and delay. The imminence that we found in the language of soonness, and I am coming soon, Jesus says, but then the element of delay that we found even in the fifth seal of chapter six.

It starts in chapter five, where the Lamb, we said, the vision in chapter five begins with God seated on the throne from chapter four in heaven, and he's holding a scroll with seven seals. The scroll, I suggested already, contains God's plan for bringing about redemption, the conclusion of his redemptive plan for all creation and all of humanity, including both judgment and salvation. Now, the dilemma in chapter five is who is worthy of enacting this? Who is worthy to set this, the contents of the scroll in motion? Who is worthy to implement this plan of redemption? And the Lamb, Jesus Christ, who was slain because of his death on the cross, because of his resurrection, is the only one worthy to implement this plan.

Now, at the end of chapter five, you might expect that this plan will develop and unfold in a rather progressive, linear fashion. It will unfold in a clear fashion that brings you right to the end. Well, that's part of the problem. Although you might expect a rather clean and clear and progressive unfolding of these events, Revelation doesn't.

Your expectation is actually, and I think intentionally, frustrated over and over again. So again, we already read in chapters six and nine through 11 that the author indicates that there might be some delay. But what is intriguing is the delay begins by the sixth seal at the end of chapter six, which seems to bring you to the very end.

Notice the language, then I saw him open the sixth seal. A violent earthquake occurred. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of air.

The entire moon became like blood. The stars of the heaven fell to earth as a fig tree drops its unripe figs when shaken by a wind. The sky was split apart like a scroll being rolled up, and every mountain and island was moved from its place.

Then, the kings of the earth, the nobles, the generals, the rich, the powerful, and every slave and free person hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains. And they said to the mountains, and the rocks fall on us and hide us from the face of the one seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb. Because who can stand in the day of their wrath? I think this is a reference of the second coming.

Yet two things to notice. Number one, we're only at chapter six. We still have a number of chapters left to go before we get to the end of the book.

Second, you'll notice we're only at Seal Six. And seal seven actually gets delayed. You don't get to seal seven until you get to chapter eight.

So, there's a delay. So, the author brings you to the brink of the end. We're at the day of the Lord and at the end of chapter six in the sixth seal, but we still have another seal to go, and we still have more books to go.

And it doesn't actually describe the arrival of the day of the Lord. It doesn't tell you what happens. So, revelation raises your expectation of here's the end, the day of the Lord, what's going to happen? But then it backs off, and there's more material.

There's still another seal. You're waiting for that seventh seal to come. And it does finally come in chapter eight.

So that even the seventh seal is delayed until chapter eight. So, once again, your expectations of how the book should unfold kind of get frustrated. And again, I think that's intentional.

The author is building delay into the very structure of his work. You see that also with the trumpets in chapters eight and nine, we see the next series of seven. We already said chapter eight begins by finally unleashing seal number seven, the series that begun in chapter six.

Now, a couple of chapters later, after some intervening material in chapter seven, you finally get to seal number seven. But then the author introduces you to seven trumpets. And with each trumpet, a plague or a judgment is unleashed on creation.

But it's interesting. Once more, by the time you get to chapter nine, it's interesting. The first four trumpets happen in rather rapid succession.

So again, you're kind of primed to see these events happen rapidly, and progression happens naturally and rapidly. But then, in the last two trumpets, the author slows down, he slows you down and describes them in much more detail. Then, chapter nine ends with trumpet number six.

Where's the seventh one? Well, you don't get it until towards the end of chapter 11. So, more delay, more delay takes place. Interestingly, in chapter 10 and verse seven, which itself is delaying the coming of trumpet number seven, it doesn't come to the end of chapter 11, but already in chapter 10, which is in the middle of trumpet six and trumpet seven.

In verse seven, John is told this. I'll actually read verse six. He swore by the one who lives forever and ever.

John sees a vision of this angelic being, this colossal angelic being. He swore this angelic being by the one who lives forever and ever, who created heaven and what is in it, the earth and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it. There will be no more delay.

Oh, that's interesting because again, we're only at chapter 10. We still have 12 more chapters of the book to go. We still have a lot of territory to cover.

So once again, you're led to expect there's not going to be any more delay, but there is. There's more delay. And finally, again, at the end of chapter 11, you get the seventh trumpet blown, and it's the final judgment.

Then, in chapter 16, you find they're introduced to the bold judgments, and you do get them. You do get the seven bold judgments, but still, at the end of chapter 16, you're not quite at the end. Chapter 16 introduces the final battle of Armageddon, but it just says the armies are gathered, and it never records the battle.

Once again, your expectations are frustrated. And there's more intervening material. Chapters 17 and 18 will describe Babylon, Rome, and its judgments.

And then finally, finally, with chapter 19 and verse 11, you're introduced to Jesus Christ in the form of the rider on the white horse. Now, he comes to bring judgment in chapters 19 and 20. You have a series of various removal scenes as everything that opposes God and his kingdom is removed.

The nations that oppose him, the armies and kings of the earth that oppose him in chapter 19, the two beasts in chapter 19, Satan in chapter 20. Ultimately, all that is wrong with creation, everything is removed at the end of 20 to make way for the arrival of a new creation in 21 and 22. Now, what you have been waiting for finally occurs, but it has come only after a series of stops and starts, delays, and frustrated expectations.

And again, I think that is intentional on John's part. I think John intentionally builds delay into his narrative because, again, the literary delay corresponds to the theological tension between imminency and delay. That is the parousia of Christ could come very soon.

Jesus promises that in chapter 22, I am coming soon in 22:7, 12, and 20. John tells you that he's about to write about these things that are going to take place soon, or they are near all the contents of the book of Revelation. Yet now we see in the form, especially of the fifth seal in chapter 6:9 through 11, and in the very literary structure of Revelation, we find John balancing out that emphasis on soonness with an emphasis on the possibility of delay.

And I think that's because John is not contradicting himself, or it's not that John can't make up his mind what it is. Is it, I think, simply that he realizes because he's already living in the end, he simply cannot be sure when Christ is coming back? It could be very soon, or there could be some delay.

Again, John does not see 2,000 years of delay. He doesn't tell you how long that's going to delay, but neither does he predict that Christ will come back in the first century. Christ could come back soon.

There could be some delay. John simply doesn't know, and neither do his readers. Therefore, they need to live in light of and be prepared for either scenario, whether Christ comes back in their lifetime or whether there is some delay.

They have to be prepared for both by being faithful witnesses to Jesus Christ, by carrying out their mission of witness to the nations of the earth and by refusing to compromise with the Roman empire. So, Revelation then balances both imminency and delay. It would be incorrect to take Revelation as a whole, or any of those texts in Revelation, to indicate or to conclude that John was predicting an end that never arrived.

Therefore, he was badly mistaken. So, let's conclude our discussion by looking at some implications of this issue of delay of the Parousia and the New Testament teaching by drawing both some theological and practical implications. Obviously, those two are related to each other, but I'll treat them separately.

In other words, what are some of the theological implications of the passages that we discussed and the perspective that we have suggested on the New Testament teaching on the coming of Christ and its apparent delay? And then, what are some of the more pastoral or practical implications of this issue for the church today? First of all, let's look at some of the theological implications. I simply want to point out two of them that I think are important because these two tripped up a number of Christians and even unbelievers who look at this issue and wonder how it can be reconciled, if at all. The first issue is the trustworthiness of Scripture as a whole.

The second one is God's sovereignty. I don't intend to be exhaustive by any means, but just give a couple of hints at the direction that I might go. First of all, the trustworthiness of Scripture.

As I've already indicated in the introduction, I've known a number of people, a number of Christians, for whom this issue caused a crisis in their faith. The fact that the New Testament seems to predict certain authors, even Jesus himself and his sayings in the Gospels, seemed to predict that Christ was going to come back right away. Yet, 2,000 years later, here we are.

Were the New Testament authors wrong? If they were, what does that say about the reliability of the New Testament itself? What does this say about the reliability of Jesus' teaching? If they got it wrong in this issue, what does that say about their trustworthiness? Now, whether we should go with the slippery slope argument and say, well, if they're wrong in this or wrong in everything or not, at the very least, it

certainly calls into question a rather large swath of Jesus' teaching and the apostles' teaching because the coming of Christ does play a role in their teaching. Certainly, it does at least raise the issue of whether they could be wrong on other issues as well. It calls into question their reliability and their trustworthiness.

But I've suggested throughout this entire series of lectures one of the implications is that if we approach the text in the way I've suggested, or even a number of other ways, is it's not necessary to conclude that the New Testament authors or Jesus were predicting the end and then they were mistaken. We saw in the Gospels that some of the texts probably do not predict the final second coming of Christ at all. When Jesus says, some of you standing here will not die before you see the kingdom of God coming in glory, he's probably not referring to a second coming, but something else.

In my opinion, the transfiguration, which is recorded in all three Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, is the next event after that saying. But even if you think it's referring to the AD 70 and the destruction of Jerusalem, or the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, there's no need to take that as a failed prediction. When Jesus promises that the kingdom of God is near, Jesus is not predicting an end-time kingdom that brings an end to the world, and then he is mistaken.

But Jesus is telling us that the kingdom is about to be inaugurated. The kingdom is already being inaugurated before its final manifestation in the future. And even those statements of Jesus where he is promising that he is coming soon, that we should understand those as indications that since the end time kingdom had already arrived, the end time, the final consummation could take place at any moment.

Christ could come back at any time. And Jesus uses that to instill vigilance and watchfulness in his followers, not to predict when he's going to return. We saw the same was true with Paul's letters, that Paul himself made statements such as the time is short, or he made statements where it appeared that he might be alive.

We who are alive will be caught up when Christ returns. Paul made statements that seem to suggest that he thought Christ would come back in his lifetime. But again, Paul does have a couple hints that there could be some delay.

And the very structure of the book of Acts, the nation going out to all the earth, embracing the ends of the earth, seem to suggest that there could be some delay. So, Paul also, I think, should be understood as not predicting an end that never arrived, and therefore he was wrong. Simply living within that same tension of living in the end times, but waiting for its final consummation, meant that there was an expectation that Christ could come back at any moment in his lifetime, without insisting and predicting that he would.

Then, we saw the same with the general epistles. James, Peter, and 1 John, and I think other statements in the general epistles that would fall in this category are that they share that same perspective, that they expected Christ to come back soon, without predicting that he would. Then we got to the book of Revelation and saw that more than any other book, Revelation balances imminency and delay, that Christ could come back very soon.

But Revelation balanced that out with the possibility that there could be some delay. And the fact is, John, I think, is admitting he simply doesn't know. And the readers need to be prepared for either scenario, for the soon return of Christ in their lifetime, but also the possibility of some delay.

We even saw that it was already balanced out in Jesus' parables. In Matthew 24 and 25, the parable of the faithful steward at the end of 24, the parable of the five wise maidens in chapter 25, that balanced imminency and delay. So, all of that makes it unnecessary to conclude that New Testament authors were predicting the end of the world, the second coming of Christ, and they were mistaken. They were wrong.

And therefore, we can't trust them. Again, I've known Christians for whom that precipitated a crisis of faith, some to the extent that they've turned their backs on the gospel completely, because of failure to recognize that certainly, if Jesus and the other authors were so wrong on this, how can we trust the gospel at all? So, I think what this does is remove a significant barrier. This is not the only barrier, and there are obviously, apologetically speaking, other issues to consider that cause people to question, such as the problem of evil.

But I'm simply addressing this one issue that I think, looking at the text in this way, removes a significant barrier to the reliability of Jesus' teaching and the teaching of his followers, that they were not predicting an end, and then were mistaken, so that we can have confidence in their teaching on this issue, and I think on other issues as well. The other issue to look at, a theological issue, is the issue of God's sovereignty. How does that fit in with, especially with imminency and delay? If the New Testament authors are convinced that Christ could come back soon, even in their lifetime, but they're also convinced that there could be some delay, how does that fit in with God's sovereignty? Again, I don't want to get into a lengthy discussion on this.

I don't want to get into a lengthy discussion on how God views time and ontologically God's relationship with time and creation and things like that. But I simply think part of this is related to the issue of another tension, that is, the tension between God's sovereignty and human responsibility, which is found in the pages of Scripture. There are probably different ways to solve that.

I'm not interested in doing that. But simply looking at the tension in the text, New Testament authors, without embarrassment, set both beside each other, both

imminency and delay, as well as God's sovereignty and responsibility to human beings. On the one hand, New Testament authors can be certain that Christ is coming back soon.

But then they can turn right around and say there could be some delay. And they can say things like, God himself delays to give humanity a chance to repent. Well, if God is sovereign and knows all things, including the timing of his return, how can there be delay, especially in light of the need for giving humanity a chance to respond? Again, I simply want to conclude.

I think that's simply built into the tension one finds between God's sovereignty and human responsibility, that God is sovereign and knows all things. Yet he still, we find him in Scripture, taking into account and responding to and taking into account human choice and human responsibility. And we find that I think, in the tension between imminency and delay, that yes, God does know the time of the return.

Jesus himself said so in Matthew 24. Only the Father knows. Yet God can still choose to respond within that, respond to humanity by giving them a chance to repent and delaying his coming. How that fits together, I'll leave that up to others to try to explain.

But I think it's more helpful to explore how the tension between God's sovereignty and human responsibility and imminency and delay function in Scripture. For example, lest we think that we have all kinds of time left, or lest we think and question whether God is going to actually bring his purpose to a conclusion, we need to emphasize God's sovereignty. And we need to emphasize this imminency or the nearness of Christ and his return, lest we think that time is going to go on forever.

But lest we think that Christ is going to come back immediately and we can make rash choices, such as you've heard proverbial, whether proverbial or literally true, you've heard stories of the persons that have taken out loans because they thought they weren't going to have to pay them back because Christ is going to come back immediately. Lest we do foolish things like that, we need to be reminded of delay, that God could delay his coming to give humanity a chance to repent. But also that means we need to be prepared for that and live our lives responsibly.

So, this tension between imminency and delay is not meant to call into question God's sovereignty, but I think it reflects that tension between God's sovereignty. Yes, he does know the time of his return. He will sovereignly bring about his coming.

But he also takes into consideration the response of humanity. And this tension between imminency and delay reminds us that we need to be prepared for either scenario. We can't think that we have all kinds of time to live and we can get our lives in order towards the end.

Neither should we think that Christ is going to come back immediately in our lifetime and therefore make rash and foolish decisions that we might have to pay the consequences for if there's still more delay. The point is we simply don't know, and we need to be prepared for either case or scenario. So, our response to imminency and delay needs to be in line with how the scripture uses those.

To encourage God's people to be faithful and obedient. Not to call into question God's sovereignty. Not to reflect a contradiction on Paul or John's part or anyone else's.

But to simply present the reality, the fact that because we're already living in the end, we simply don't know when Christ will return to wrap up history. And we need to be prepared for either imminency. Christ could come back in our lifetime or delay.

He might be delayed for some time, and we need to be prepared for either. But because of God's sovereignty we know for certain that he will return and God will send his son to bring history to its conclusion. There are other theological issues we could reflect on but I'll stop with those two.

The trustworthiness of scripture and also God's sovereignty and how this tension between delay and imminency relates to both of those. But what about pastorally and practically? I want to draw three conclusions. Again, there are many things we could say but I want to draw three conclusions I think that arise out of our study of these texts.

The first one, again, is related to the first theological conclusion, and that is simply the trustworthiness and confidence in Jesus' teaching and in scripture. That is, if what we've said is correct in the way we've approached these texts, and even if you don't resonate with my view of them and you think that now they're better explained by taking them as referring to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 Even if that's your conclusion that's fine. That's still better and preferable than taking these texts that we've looked at in the last few lectures as failed predictions that call into question Jesus and, the New Testament authors, his follower's trustworthiness.

Instead, if anything close to what we said is true or even one of the other views that does not entail a failed prediction then we can have confidence in Jesus' teaching and we can have confidence in the teaching of scripture itself. Especially on this issue but then I think on other issues as well. It's one thing to say that Jesus was ignorant of his coming, the time of his coming, which he confesses that he is in Matthew chapter 24 and verse 36 when he says, even the son of man does not know the day or the hour.

It's one thing to say Jesus did not know, he was ignorant of the time of his coming. It's another thing to say he predicted his coming, and he was mistaken. I think it's the latter one that is not the case and is not borne out by a careful study of these texts.

I think when these texts are understood in their context, there's no reason to question Jesus' teaching or the teaching of the other apostles and the scriptures and New Testament documents, and we can have complete reliability and confidence in Jesus' teaching and scripture on this issue and I would conclude on other issues as well. Another conclusion is that the emphasis, especially on delay in the New Testament, reminds us to avoid all date settings, and we need to hear that again because it keeps going on. The fact that Christ is coming soon, we'll look at that a little bit more in the third issue that I want to raise, but the fact that Christ is coming soon should remind us that we need to be prepared for that.

We cannot live life as if Christ can't come back in our lifetime. We need to live with that same expectation that the New Testament authors lived with. It's a little harder for us because 2,000 years later, I think we're a little more accustomed to delay, but the fact that so many people throughout church history have predicted a date should not jade us to the fact that Christ could very well come back soon.

When we look out at our world and see what's going on, we should be reminded that Christ could very well come back in our lifetime. I don't think we should go as far to conclude that he will or go on to date setting as some have, but the fact that there have been so many failed predictions throughout history should not blind us to the fact that we need to recapture that sense of imminency. Christ could come back at any time and we need to live life with that expectancy.

However, the problem is when that perspective is taken, as it has so often throughout church history, to predict even set a date and predict exactly when Christ will come back. Usually, it happens when individuals look at technological advances, political developments in our world, and natural disasters, and they match those up with biblical prophetic text. They draw conclusions as to how near the coming of Christ is, even setting dates. To give you just a couple of examples, I remember when I was a seminary student walking out the door one day, this was back in the late 80s, 1980s, walking out my door and finding this little pamphlet stuck in between the door that said 88 reasons why Christ is going to come back in 1988 and setting a specific date.

The day came and went, I think it was in September of that year; the day came and went, and the individual recalculated, at least admitted he was wrong, but recalculated, came up with another date, and it was wrong as well. And obviously, here I am still speaking to you. I remember a few years later when I was pastoring a church in rural Montana, southwestern Montana, I was driving home one day and listening to a radio station where there were a group of prophecy experts discussing

the events of the First Gulf War where George W. Bush liberated Kuwait from Saddam Hussein.

That was in the early 90s; that kind of dates me, but if anyone remembers those events, it was during that time I was listening to this radio station, and they were discussing these events in light of biblical prophecy, or more accurately, discussing biblical prophecy in light of those events. And I'll withhold the names of those individuals to protect the guilty, but one of them said, well, you should be, they were all convinced that this Gulf War, what was happening in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia and Saddam Hussein, that he was the Antichrist probably, and this was going to escalate to become the Battle of Armageddon discussed in Revelation. And therefore, Christ was coming, and was right around the corner.

And they started saying things like one of them said, well, you should start evangelizing your friends and family members. I thought, well, that's good advice, but we should be doing that anyway. Another one said you should empty your savings and cash in all your valuables and your CDs and 401ks and everything, and invest the money in the Lord's work, probably his ministry.

And that was the early nineties. I hope no one followed that foolish advice, but what they needed to hear was the emphasis on delay as well. That yes, we don't want to lose that sense of imminency that Christ could come back at any moment.

Christ could come back even in our lifetime. But the fact that there could be some delay, the need to balance that out with the issue of delay, warns us, along with other things, warns us against the foolishness of trying to predict the end when it's going to take place. Again, we need both perspectives.

Let us think that we can do things like take out loans or we should spend all our savings and money because Christ is coming back immediately. We need to hear the side of delay. No, there could be some delay.

You need to be prepared for that. But lest we think that we have years and years to do what we want because we see that things have gone on for 2,000 years. We don't want to be like the false teachers in 2 Peter and say, where is the promise of his coming? Instead, we need to hear the message of imminency.

That is, Christ could come back in your lifetime. Don't think that you have forever. Don't think that you have the rest of your life.

Don't think that time is going to go on forever. Christ could come back within your lifetime. The thing is, we need to be prepared for either scenario.

The emphasis in the New Testament on both imminency and delay both serve important pastoral purposes to help us to order our lives and live responsibly in light of the fact that Christ could come back right away in our lifetime. We need to be prepared for that and live with that expectancy. Yet, Christ could delay for some time.

We need to be prepared for that as well. I think, probably more than anything, in the face of a long history that seems to be perpetuated and persist of failed predictions of when Christ is going to come back based on everything going on in the world, we need to hear the message of delay as well and to live appropriately. So, no more date setting.

Avoid all date setting. The third issue that I want to discuss very briefly, the practical and pastoral implication, is the need for holy living. That is, we need to look at the issue of imminency and delay in light of the way it functioned in the New Testament.

We saw that the authors never, ever use it to predict when the end is going to come or to predict how close they are to the end. Without exception, starting with the teaching of Jesus in the gospel all the way to chapter 22 of Revelation, there's one persistent and consistent theme, and that is the emphasis on the soon return of Christ, and even the possibility of delay is always for the purpose of instilling urgency in the people of God—the urgency to live responsibly in the present.

The urgency to live holy lives. Especially the book of Revelation, a book more than any other that we often associate with eschatology, was not written to give us information so we can construct a nice time chart or understand exactly how events will unfold in the future, what it's going to look like. But even in Revelation, it's to warn the people of God not to compromise with an ungodly world.

Especially in the first century, Christians were tempted to compromise with the pagan Roman Empire. Revelation's primary goal is to get them not to compromise with Rome but to obey Jesus Christ, the Lamb, to worship God and the Lamb only no matter what the consequences it might bring. A failure to recognize that and just to use teachings on the return of Christ to satisfy your curiosity as to when he's going to come back or to conclude that Jesus and the New Testament authors were predicting an end and it didn't come and they were wrong, is to fail to understand the primary emphasis of these texts.

All of them without exception are in the context of motivating the people of God to live holy lives. And we need to use them the same way. For example, the book of Revelation ends with this glorious vision in 21:1 through 22:5. Of all of God's people on a new creation, on a new earth, worshiping God in God's presence, the Lamb and the throne of God are in the center of the new creation.

All are worshiping him as his kings and priests. It ends by saying they will see his face, they will worship him, and they will have his name on his foreheads like the priests did in the Old Testament. And then they will rule forever, chapter 22, verse 5. They will be a kingdom of priests.

But we're already, chapter 1 and verse 5 of Revelation reminds us we're already a kingdom of priests. What that means is if we're going to be a kingdom of priests in the future, new creation, but we're already a kingdom of priests, we should in the present be reflecting the values of the new creation right now. If the kingdom of God that will be consummated in the future and brought to its conclusion and final fulfillment, if it is already inaugurated and present, shouldn't we be reflecting the values of the kingdom already in the way we live, in the way we pursue justice, in the way we live holy lives, in the way we worship, in the way we obey Jesus Christ, in the way we refuse to compromise with this world? Shouldn't we be reflecting those values already in the present? So, the coming of Jesus Christ, whether soon or delayed, must function in our lives the same way it did in the New Testament as a powerful motivation and impetus for holy living.

People should be able to look at their lives and see in the present a reflection of what life will be like in the future: a perfected, consummated kingdom of God. Because your life and mine might be the only heaven and the only future that some people ever see. This is Dr. David Mathewson in his teaching on the question, where is his coming? Session five, delay of the parousia in revelation and the theological and pastoral implications.