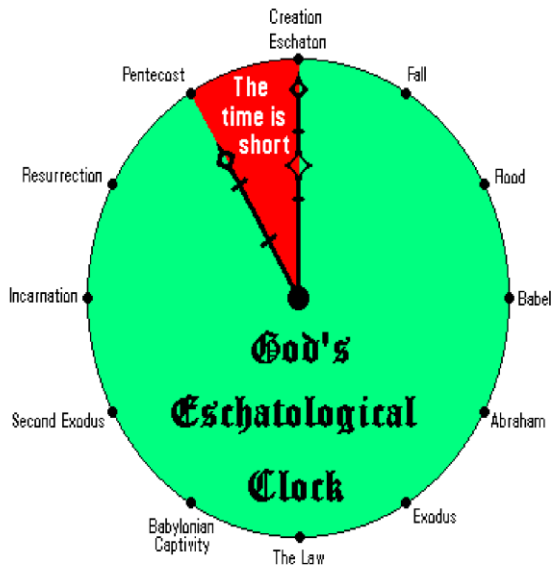


# Can We Know the Time of His Coming?



## A CRITIQUE OF PRETRIBBISM

Mark W. Fenison, ThM.

# Can We Know the Time Of His Coming?

*A Critique of Pretribbism*

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Published under the Authority

**Victory Baptist Church**

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# The Lord's Return

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## Contents

Can You Know the Time of the Lord's Return?.....	4
What Things Reveal the Unknown Time.....	7
The Question.....	13
The Parable of all Eschatological Parables.....	14
The Focal Point of His Coming.....	16
What it Means to Watch?.....	17

# Can You Know the Time of the Lord's Return?

*So likewise ye, when ye shall see all these things, **know** that it is near, even at the doors. (Mat 24:33)*

*But of that day and hour **knoweth** no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only. (Mat 24:36)*

Some suggest that the two texts above cannot refer to the same coming without contradicting each other. Based upon this assumption of a contradiction they suggest that these texts must refer to two different comings of Christ. This assumption says there is a coming that can't be known versus a coming that can be known.

However, there is clear contextual support to show that both texts refer to the very same coming (kingdom coming) and they can be reconciled with each other because the time of this coming cannot be known now, but will become known when certain things yet in the future begin to come to pass.

1. There is but one *literal* description of His coming (vv. 30-31) in the context of each text and it is the same coming – the kingdom coming of Christ.
2. The word “*but*” begins Matthew 24:36 and grammatically demonstrates verse 36 is the conclusion of what is stated in verses 33-35.

## The Lord's Return

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3. Hence, what presently cannot be known to anyone but the Father can be known to those watching for certain things to come to pass in the future.

These facts are contextually indisputable, and prevent any reasonable basis for demanding that Matthew 24:36 has any other coming in view other than the one just described in Matthew 24:30-31 – the kingdom coming, as the word “*but*” demands Matthew 24:36 is a continuation of verses 32-35 which has verses 30-31 as its subject.

Moreover, Jesus again confirms that the exact timing of the Post-trib kingdom coming of Christ cannot presently be known to anyone but the Father:

*When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel? And he said unto them, it is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power. (Act 1:6-7)*

Therefore, there is no contradiction between Matthew 24:36 and Acts 1:6-7 as both equally deny that anyone can know the time of His kingdom coming now. Acts 1:6-7 refers to the time when the kingdom is restored to Israel which is a post-trib event. Indeed, Matthew 24:33 demands that the time of the Post-trib coming described in Matthew 24:29-31 is presently unknown to all:

*So likewise ye, **when ye shall see all these things, know** that it is near, even at the doors. – Mt. 24:33*

## The Lord's Return

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Common sense should tell you that verse 33 above makes no sense if it could be known presently. Hence, the present denial that anyone can know His coming in verse 36 is perfectly consistent with verse 33 demanding that one must watch for future events to know what they cannot know now without those events first coming to pass.

Right now before “*these things begin*” no man can know that time when the Lord returns but the Father. However, when these things begin to come to pass, the Lord tells the same ones that they can then “**KNOW**” that it is near.

# The Lord's Return

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## What Things Reveal the Unknown Time?

*And when **these things** begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh. (Luke 21:28)*

*And he spake to them a parable; Behold the fig tree, and all the trees; (Luke 21:29)*

*When they now shoot forth, ye see and know of your own selves that summer is now nigh at hand. (Luke 21:30)*

*So likewise ye, when ye see **these things** come to pass, know ye that the kingdom of God is nigh at hand. (Luke 21:31)*

*Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass away, till all be fulfilled. (Luke 21:32)*

Again, the answer to the question is made clear by simply observing the contextual factors. For example, in Matthew 24:4-14 the Lord lists certain things that do not indicate the end has come. After listing some things beginning in verses 4-6 he then concludes verse six by denying such things mean the end has come:

*And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, **but the end is not yet.** (Mat 24:6)*

## The Lord's Return

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He goes on to list more things that “*shall*” come, but then in verse 8 repeats that such are not signs the end has come, but rather are just the beginning of birth pangs:

*All these are the **beginning** of sorrows. (Mat 24:8)*

He goes on using the familiar future tense “*shall*” to describe other things, but it is not until verses 14-15 that he first describes the things that do reveal the end has come:

*And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and **then** shall the end come. (Mat 24:14)*

***When** ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place, (whoso readeth, let him understand:) (Mat 24:15)*

With the words “*when ye....shall see*” of verse 15 is a specific thing and a specific time frame described that characterizes that the end has come. We believe that beginning in verse 15 is what Jesus was referring to when He said “***when** these things begin...know that it is nigh.*” Why? Because everything prior to verse 15 cannot be dated, as these are general trials and tribulations that are found in all generations including the last generation. However, with the “*when*” of verse 15 the Bible student knows that he has come to a specific dated event. Daniel pinpoints the occurrence of this event in the middle of the 70<sup>th</sup> week of Daniel or exactly three and one half years before Christ comes in glory. Without question, this event lets the believer “*know*” exactly where he is in God’s time schedule of events, and when the Lord will come from



## The Lord's Return

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heaven. The literal generation that sees this specific event occur will be the literal generation that sees the Lord coming in glory.

Furthermore, it is at this specific event that the Lord says, **“he that readeth let him understand”** – Mt. 24:15. Understand what? From the context the answer should be obvious. He had been asked **“when”** would the end of the world come and what would be the sign of His coming (v. 3). He then listed things that he explicitly says do not indicate the end or his coming. But when he comes to verse 15 and then says, **“when you see”** he lists the very first thing that does indicate the end of the world and His coming is near. Therefore, **“he that readeth let him understand.”** He is to understand that **“then”** and in **“those days”** or those days described between verses 15-29 are the final days of this age. From verse 15 forward the Lord uses time terms repeatedly such as **“then”** and **“in those days”** showing this is a specific period of time and all the events listed occur within that final period of time. Hence, there is no excuse for the reader to misunderstand his later words when he says **“when these things begin”** as he is pinpointing the events that reveal the precise time when they can **“know”** the kingdom coming is at hand. Those events are listed for us between verses 15-29.

Jesus used the same telescopic method used by all Old Testament prophets. He takes a near event (destruction of Jerusalem of A.D. 70) which concludes in scattering Israel into all the world thus bringing an end to the nation of Israel **“until the times of the gentiles be fulfilled”** (Lk. 21:24). However, after Israel has again been gathered to Palestine and Jerusalem this A.D. 70 event will be revisited and

## The Lord's Return

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replayed, except instead of the armies of Titus, it will be the armies of the whole world gathered against them in the land of Israel outside of Jerusalem in the plains of Megiddo where the battle of Armageddon will take place under the sixth seal, sixth trumpet and sixth vial. However, the sign that such a time has come is when the Anti-Christ is publicly revealed. This is a world leader who openly claims to be God the Son, the promised Messiah – the Anti-Christ or the one who openly takes the place of Christ before the world stage.

*Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God.* – 2 Thes. 2:3-4

Matthew 24:29 provides the reader with a second sign, which is another timed event – “*immediately AFTER the tribulation of THOSE DAYS.*” This is the second major sign that the end of the world has arrived and His coming is near at hand. This is the sign that interrupts the armies from destroying Jerusalem and turns their focus upon the heavens. Miraculous terrestrial and celestial phenomena occur which stops the armies of the Antichrist from destroying Jerusalem (Rev. 6:12-19). These terrestrial and celestial phenomena are the subject of the seven trumpets (Rev. 8-11).

After providing two clear signs that the end of the world has arrived, Christ then provides the sign of His coming. Celestial signs have turned the focus of the armies

## The Lord's Return

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surrounding Jerusalem unto the heavens. These terrestrial and celestial signs occur over an unknown period of time between the end of the tribulation and the coming of Christ from heaven (Rev. 8-11). However, the celestial signs in heaven transform into the last and final sign of His coming. They had not only asked, “*what is the sign of the end of the world*”, and he gave them two distinct signs, but they had asked “*what is the sign of..... thy coming.*” In Matthew 24:30 he answers that question. The sign of His coming will be the armies of heaven seen visibly over Jerusalem with the King of kings as their leader. It is at this point, the armies of the Antichrist turn their focus away from Israel and Jerusalem and vainly attempt to engage the armies gathered in the clouds. The period of time covered under this sign is the content of the last seven plagues (Rev. 16).

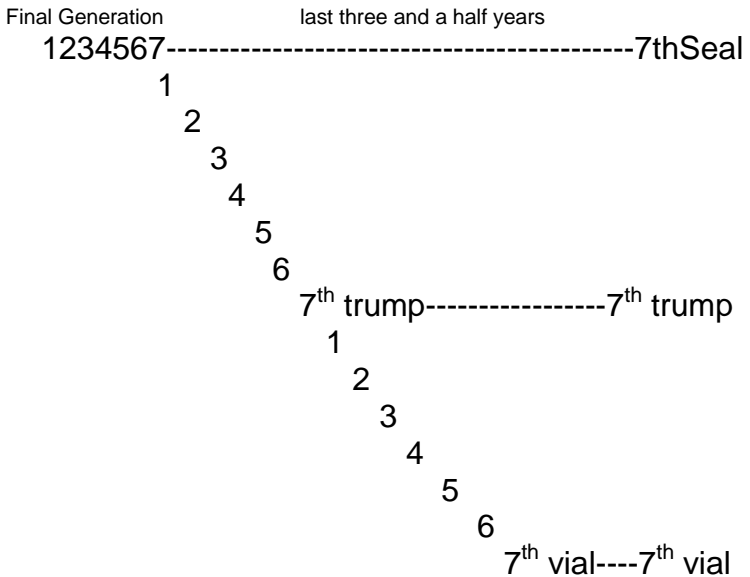
The book of Revelation is not in a strict chronological order but in an overlapping order based on the number seven. The overlap is *somewhat* akin to the following graph on the next page.

# The Lord's Return

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## The Chronological Graph of Revelation

1 2 3 4 5 seals current age birth pangs in generations between 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> coming



The first five seals characterize every generation but as time progresses to the end they increase in severity as birth pangs until they reach the time period of Matthew 24:15. Then all six seals come to their climax, just as birth pangs come to their climax before the birth or revelation of a child from a womb. However, in this case, the climax of birth pangs brings forth the revelation of the Son of God from heaven.

# The Lord's Return

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## The Question

*And as he sat upon the Mount of Olives, the disciples came unto him privately, saying, Tell us, **when** shall these things be? and **what** shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world? (Mat 24:3)*

This question hinges on two words “*when*” and “*what*”. The first question is answered by the same word “*when*” found in verse 15 (“*when ye shall see...then*”). The second word is answered first negatively in verses 4-14 (“*the end is not yet*”) and then positively in verses 15-29 (“*when...then....those days...these be the days...immediately after those days...then...*”).

Our contextual interpretation fits the contextual question exactly. Jesus tells them first what “*things*” do not indicate the end has come or that His coming is near. He then proceeds to use time terms to describe the exact events and time that precedes His coming. After doing this, he reverts to parables to reinforce the need to be WATCHING for exactly those things that will indicate His coming is near.

# The Lord's Return

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## The Parable of all Eschatological Parables

*And he spake to them a parable; Behold the fig tree, and **all the trees**; (Luke 21:29)*

There are three significant things about this parable. First, it is the only parable repeated in all three accounts of the Olivet Discourse. Second, it is the only parable Jesus says "*Now learn.*" Third, it is the first parable listed in each of the three accounts of the Olivet Discourse. Therefore, it is the interpretative parable for all the other parables.

The parable is simple if taken the way the Lord gave it. The lesson is not to be limited to merely one kind of tree, but it is a lesson that can be learned from "*all the trees.*" This statement denies any specific restriction of this parable to the nation of Israel, as its lesson is taught by "*all the trees*" and not just one (fig tree).

Since Christ has told them clearly what things **do not** indicate His coming is nigh versus what things **do** indicate His coming is nigh, He then proceeds to use this parable to emphasize the need for watching for those things that indicate His coming is nigh, so they can "*know*" when the end of the world has come and his appearance is nigh. The parables emphasize the need for "*watching*" for the very things that allow them to "*know*" His return is nigh at hand.

His point is very simple. If you are not watching for when the trees begin to "*shoot forth*", you are not watching for the coming of summer. To watch for summer's coming is to watch for when the trees begin to "*shoot forth.*"

## The Lord's Return

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***So likewise** ye, when ye see these things come to pass, know ye that the kingdom of God is nigh at hand. (Luke 21:31)*

The direct analogy to the time of His coming could not be set forth any clearer – “**SO LIKEWISE.**” So likewise what? Just as one must watch for the coming of summer by watching for those things that indicate spring has arrived, so likewise, “*when ye see these things*” (the things listed in verses 15-30) then at that precise time you can “**KNOW**” what you could not know about the time of the end of the world and the appearance of Christ. What is it that could not be known about the end of the world and the coming of Christ previous to His arrival of those things? You could not know THE TIME of the end of the world or the time of His coming.

Nothing could be plainer or clearer, unless you have an unbiblical view you must defend, which clouds your ability to see what is set before you in clear and simple language.

# The Lord's Return

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## The Focal Point of His Coming

No parable could be more simple and straight forward. You cannot be watching for the Lord's coming if you are not watching for these things to begin. You cannot "*know*" how nigh His coming is if you are not watching for these things to begin. The "*So Likewise*" conclusion of this parable demands they are inseparable from the command to "*watch*" which follows. The "*So likewise*" conclusion of this parable demands "*these things*" are the inseparable focal point for watching for His coming. A *focal point* is something that is defined as the object of watching. He has clearly defined "*these things*" as the object to watch for if you are watching for His coming. If you are not watching for these things to begin you are not watching for His coming.

Pre-tribbers are not watching for our Lord's return because they are not watching for the very things Christ commanded "*his disciples*" to watch for in order to know the time of His coming and the end of the world.

In other words, you cannot be truly and Biblically watching for the coming of Christ if you are not watching for the coming of the anti-Christ first, as this is part of those "*things*" that one must watch for if they are truly watching for His return.



# The Lord's Return

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## What it means to Watch

To watch for these things to begin is to watch for His coming, as the former announce the latter. Therefore, “*his coming*” in the remaining parables includes the focal point (these things) as well as His actual arrival. He presents his coming in the manner of the ancient coming of kings to a city. The king’s caravan included soldiers going before him, and those who would clear the path and announce his arrival. All “*these things*” listed in verses 15-29 go before him clearing the path and announcing his arrival. That is why Jesus says,

*And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh. (Luke 21:28)*

The remaining parables view the coming of the Lord as inclusive of this whole caravan that attends His coming.

The parable of the good man of the house defines “*watch*” to be constantly on guard, as now none know when “*these things will begin*” and thus none know when Christ will come EXCEPT by watching. Thus, if he evil servant had watched he would not have been surprised. However, the Pre-trib view demands all must be surprised.

Noah’s generation defines “*watch*” to be inclusive of taking heed to obvious preceding signs. The gospel was being preached by Noah announcing the end was coming. The ark was being built that announced it. The animals coming in two by two clearly announced it. All these preceding signs announced the coming of the flood.

## The Lord's Return

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Likewise, all “*these things*” that immediately precede His appearance (Mt. 24:15-30) clearly announce His coming.

The evil steward parable defines “*watch*” as a warning against waiting until the last minute to be holy as there is no such thing as instant holiness. To be ready then is to be living holy now, as holiness cannot be put on and off as a coat. His coming will always come upon those suddenly who are not watching.

On the other hand, the parable of the ten virgins warns against depending solely upon holiness when you are told that such preceding things will occur. The only difference between the virgins was that five prepared in advance for what they knew was coming. The foolish were shut out of the joy that could have been theirs if they had been prepared in advance (Lk. 21:28). Pre-tribbers will be in a state of denial that they are actually living in this period (Mt. 24-15-24) because their whole system denies they could live in such a time, and therefore they shall not be prepared to face “*these things*.” So “*these things*” will come upon them while they are totally unaware of the time in which they are actually living.

The parable of the talents warn against depending solely upon advance preparation as watching includes serving God accountably NOW with what we are given.

The final exhortation has to do with a warning not to depend upon mere profession without good works. Real salvation produces good works with love for those born of God. All the wicked in the former parables (the wicked servant, the evil steward, the foolish virgins) failed to

## The Lord's Return

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measure up to the meaning of “*watch*.” It is not a mere mouth profession that avails but a profession with the life that measure up to the word “*watch*”

Mark ends his account by saying that the need to watch is not addressed to Jews but to “all.”

*And what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch. (Mar 13:37)*