

IMMINENCE AND THE RAPTURE

Part I

by Thomas Ice

That the New Testament teaches Christ could return at any moment is a strong doctrine supporting the pre-trib rapture doctrine (see 1 Cor. 1:7; 16:22; Phil. 3:20; 4:5; 1 Thess. 1:10; Tit. 2:13; Heb. 9:28; Jam. 5:7–9; 1 Pet. 1:13; Jude 21; Rev. 3:11; 22:7, 12, 17, 20). Pretribulationists call this the doctrine of imminence. If Christ can return at any moment, without the necessity of intervening signs or events, then it renders pretribulationism most likely and posttribulationism impossible. Imminence in relation to the rapture has been defined as consisting of three elements: “the certainty that He may come at any moment, the uncertainty of the time of that arrival, and the fact that no prophesied event stands between the believer and that hour.”¹

CHRIST CANNOT RETURN AT ANY MOMENT?

This application of imminence by pretribulationists to the rapture has drawn strong fire from opponents. American Robert Cameron in 1922 wrote a book against pretribulationism that centered his attack against the doctrine of imminence.² Early in his book he penned a chapter that ask: “Could Christ Have Come At Any Moment?”³ Throughout Cameron’s lengthy chapter⁴ he cites what he believes are items that would have to take place before any return by Christ, thus nullifying, in his mind, the any-moment doctrine of imminency as advocated by pretribulationists. Cameron believes that imminency “is opposed to the whole of the New Testament.”⁵

Cameron’s specific objections primarily consist of various items that he believes have to take place either during the lifetime of the Apostles or before the return of Christ could occur. For example, Cameron says that the coming of the promised Holy Spirit by Christ in the Upper Room Discourse (John 13–17) meant that many events had to take place in the lives of the Apostles and since these were promised, Christ could not return while these events were being fulfilled in the lives of the disciples.⁶ Further, Cameron contends that Jesus promised Peter that he would live till he became an old man (John 21:18–19), therefore, Christ could not return until after Peter lived to old age.⁷ Paul wrote to the church at Rome of “a visit he proposed making to Jerusalem, and then to Rome, and after that to Spain (Rom. 15:22–25, and 30–31). If he had any thought of Christ coming immediately, could he have written this?”⁸ “It is gladly conceded that the next great, direct interference from heaven with the affairs of men will be the Coming of our Lord,” declares Cameron. “But then there are so many intervening events predicted that the word ‘imminent,’ so commonly used at the present day, is certainly inadmissible.”⁹

WHY CHRIST CAN RETURN AT ANY MOMENT

Look at these verses stating that Christ could return at any moment, without warning. In their specific contexts, they instruct believers to wait and look for the Lord’s coming at any moment. Thus, these passages teach the doctrine of imminence.

- **1 Corinthians 1:7**—“awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ,”
- **1 Corinthians 16:22**—“Maranatha.” “Mar” (“Lord”), “ana” (“our”), and “tha” (“come”), meaning “our Lord, come.” The Arabic greeting implies an eager expectation.
- **Philippians 3:20**—“For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ;”

- **Philippians 4:5**—"The Lord is near."
- **1 Thessalonians 1:10**—"to wait for His Son from heaven,"
- **1 Thessalonians 5:6**—"so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober."
- **1 Timothy 6:14**—"that you keep the commandment without stain or reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ,"
- **Titus 2:13**—"looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus;"
- **Hebrews 9:28**—"so Christ . . . shall appear a second time for salvation without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await Him."
- **James 5:7-9**—"Be patient, therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. . . . for the coming of the Lord is at hand. . . . behold, the Judge is standing right at the door."
- **1 Peter 1:13**—"fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ."
- **Jude 21**—"waiting anxiously for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to eternal life."
- **Revelation 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20**—"I am coming quickly!" This means that Christ could come at any moment, quickly without warning.
- **Revelation 22:17, 20**—"And the Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' And let the one who hears say, 'Come.'" "He who testifies to these things says, 'Yes, I am coming quickly.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus."

It is significant that all of the above passages relate to the rapture and speak of the Lord's coming as something that could occur at any-moment, that it is imminent. These passages could only be true if the New Testament is teaching an imminent return. This is why believers are waiting for a person—Jesus Christ—not just an event or series of events such as those related to the tribulation leading up to Christ's second advent in which He returns to the earth and remains for His millennial reign. In contrast, second coming passages are often accompanied by events that must take place before the return. This is never the case with rapture passages. Always, it is Christ Himself that could come at any moment. Gerald Stanton offers this insight: "The posttribulational view robs every generation of an imminent, and consequently of a comforting and purifying hope. It argues that, because the rapture was not imminent in the first century, it is not imminent in any century, and it cannot be imminent *now*. Antichrist and the great Tribulation are ahead, and there is no basis for expecting Christ to come before such clearly scheduled events."¹⁰

JESUS' PROMISE TO PETER

How would one who believes that the New Testament teaches imminence deal with Cameron's charge that Jesus promised Peter that he would live to an old age, so that Christ could not return before Peter became old?¹¹ The passage from which this charge is derived is John 21:18–19, which says, "'Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself, and walk wherever you wished; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go.' Now this He said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, 'Follow Me!'"

First, John's Gospel was not written until decades after Peter's death when it would no longer be an issue one way or the other. "As far as the church at large was concerned," notes John Walvoord, "the information given to . . . Peter did not deter

their belief in imminency because on a given day few would know whether . . . Peter was still alive, and most of them were not informed about the predictions."¹²

Second, the first book in the New Testament canon is James, which appeared around A.D. 50. "By this time, Peter was in old age and his own death was conceivably imminent."¹³ Marshall Hawkins provides an excellent explanation as follows:

Time for this gap between Peter's middle age and his old age is allowed for by the progress of revelation. It was not until the book of James (written just about A.D. 50), and then later in Paul's writings that the imminence of the rapture is revealed. Twenty years would have elapsed between the prophecy and the writing of James—enough time for Peter to have aged sufficiently. . . . By this time imminence was a viable doctrine for most of the church since they would have no idea whether Peter was alive at any one moment or not. . . . For those accompanying Peter at this time, the rapture was also imminent because Peter may have been seized and martyred at any time, making the rapture possible immediately afterward.¹⁴

Hawkins concludes as follows:

It must be kept in mind that any attack on imminence due to the prophecy of Peter's death must also take into account the passage in James chapter 5. Imminence must be disproved *first* before a persuasive argument against imminence can be maintained here. There are enough doubts about Peter's age, about the time of the revelation of the doctrine of imminence, about how old Peter had to be before his death became imminent, and about when the prophecy of his death became known, to make the posttribulational case insecure. As long as the passage in James stands, imminence can be correlated with the prophecy in John chapter 21.¹⁵

We will find as we diffuse the many landmines set against pretribulationism that nothing in the New Testament stands in the way of Christ's any-moment return. It is truly a blessed hope to realize that the rapture is indeed imminent. Maranatha!

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

¹ Gerald B. Stanton, *Kept from the Hour: Biblical Evidence for the Pretribulational Return of Christ*, 4th. edition (Miami Springs, FL: Schoettle Publishing Co., [1956], 1991), p. 108.

² Robert Cameron, *Scriptural Truth About The Lord's Return* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1922).

³ Cameron, *Scriptural Truth*, p. 21.

⁴ Cameron, *Scriptural Truth*, pp. 21-69.

⁵ Cameron, *Scriptural Truth*, p. 21.

⁶ Cameron, *Scriptural Truth*, pp. 21-23.

⁷ Cameron, *Scriptural Truth*, pp. 23-24.

⁸ Cameron, *Scriptural Truth*, p. 41.

⁹ Cameron, *Scriptural Truth*, p. 68.

¹⁰ Stanton, *Kept from the Hour*, p. 123.

¹¹ Cameron, *Scriptural Truth*, pp. 23-24.

¹² John F. Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and The Tribulation: A Historical and Biblical Study of Posttribulationism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), p. 73.

¹³ Steven L. McAvoy, "A Critique of Robert Gundry's Posttribulationism" (Unpublished ThD Dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1986), p. 83.

¹⁴ Marshall Hawkins, "Rebuttal of the Posttribulational Denial of Imminence" (Unpublished ThM thesis, Capital Bible Seminary, 1979), p. 45. Cited in McAvoy, "Critique," p. 83.

¹⁵ Hawkins, "Rebuttal," pp. 45-46. Cited in McAvoy, "Critique," p. 84.