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Wayne Brindle

Liberty University, wabrindl@liberty.edu

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BIBLICAL EVIDENCE FOR THE IMMINENCE OF THE RAPTURE

Wayne A. Brindle

IN 1973 ROBERT GUNDRY, a posttribulationist, wrote that “by common consent imminence means that so far as we know no predicted event will *necessarily* precede the coming of Christ.”¹ John A. Sproule, a pretribulationist, countered in 1974 that “imminence” is better defined as the belief that “Christ can return for His Church *at any moment* and that no predicted event will intervene before that return.”² Both definitions are acceptable.

Some posttribulationists have responded to the doctrine of imminence by claiming that all the intervening signs have already occurred, and thus the final Parousia can occur at any time. Others deny that the Bible teaches imminence in any sense. Most posttribulationists prefer to redefine “imminence” along the lines adopted by Douglas Moo, who objects that the term does not necessarily mean “any moment,” but rather that it simply means the return of Christ “could take place within any limited period of time.”³

This article follows the more strict definition and discusses Bible passages that teach or strongly imply that Christ’s return for the church can occur at any time without any predicted intervening signs or events.

Wayne A. Brindle is Professor of Biblical Studies, Liberty University, Lynchburg, Virginia.

¹ Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 29 (italics his). More recently Wayne Grudem has said “imminent” means that “Christ *could* come and *might* come at any time” (*Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994], 1096, n. 7).

² John A. Sproule, *In Defense of Pretribulationism* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1980), 12 (italics his). John F. Walvoord has also said Gundry’s definition is untenable for pretribulationists (*The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976], p. 71).

³ Douglas J. Moo, “The Case for the Posttribulation Rapture Position,” in *Three Views on the Rapture*, ed. Gleason Archer Jr. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 208.

CRITERIA FOR IMMINENCE

How is one to know for certain whether a passage teaches the imminence of the rapture, when no rapture passage gives a specific temporal designation? Four criteria may be suggested, any one of which indicates imminence: (1) The passage speaks of Christ's return as at any moment. (2) The passage speaks of Christ's return as "near,"⁴ without stating any signs that must precede His coming. (3) The passage speaks of Christ's return as something that gives believers hope and encouragement, without indicating that these believers will suffer tribulation. (4) The passage speaks of Christ's return as giving hope without relating it to God's judgment of unbelievers.

Based on these criteria, many passages on the Second Coming do not teach imminence. Matthew 24–25, for example, describes Christ's return as delivering the elect from the midst of tribulation and death, and thus those chapters do not prove imminence. Likewise 2 Thessalonians 2 and Revelation 19 fail to speak of imminence, since both depict eschatological events that include signs for Christ's return (although 2 Thess. 2:1, a reference to the rapture, could arguably be separated from the rest of the chapter). However, seven New Testament passages do clearly teach the imminent return of Christ.

PASSAGES ON IMMINENCE

JOHN 14:1–3

"Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also."

John 14:3 is the only verse in the Gospels that is commonly accepted by contemporary pretribulationists and posttribulationists alike as a reference to the rapture. When Jesus said, "If I go," He was not speaking only of His death and resurrection. His going "to the Father" (v. 12) included a complete departure, in which He went bodily from earth to heaven (cf. Acts 1:9–11). His next statement, "I am coming again" (*πάλιν ἔρχομαι* is a futuristic present,

⁴ See Robert L. Thomas, "The Doctrine of Imminence in Two Recent Eschatological Systems," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 157 (October–December 2000): 439.

meaning “I will come again”),⁵ must also refer to a literal and bodily return from heaven, not a coming of Christ to individual believers in death⁶ or in the person of the Holy Spirit. Again many post-tribulationists agree with pretribulationists on this point.⁷

When Christ returns, He will take believers to be with Him forever. In verse 2 the close connection between the “dwelling places” and “My Father’s house” almost certainly locates the “dwelling places” in heaven.⁸ Twice in verses 2 and 3 Jesus discussed what He will do in his “Father’s house”—He will “prepare a place” for believers.⁹ Sometime after that has been accomplished, He will then “come again” and “receive” (*παραλήμφομαι*, “I will take to myself”) them to Himself.¹⁰ Where will He take them? He said He will take them “where I am.” But where exactly is that?

Two clues help answer this question. First, Jesus’ double reference to “preparing a place for them” in heaven is irrelevant (even

⁵ According to Robert Gromacki, “The choice of the present tense rather than the future in a prophetic context probably implies an ever-present possibility of fulfillment, or imminency” (“The Imminent Return of Jesus Christ,” *Grace Theological Journal* 6 [fall 1965]: 18).

⁶ The idea that Christ “comes” to believers at the time of their deaths is not found in Scripture at all.

⁷ Moo, “The Case for the Posttribulation Rapture Position,” 178.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 247, n. 9. “In My Father’s house” translates *ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ τοῦ πατρὸς μου*. In John 2:16 Jesus used the same words “My Father’s house” to refer to the Jerusalem temple. But the phrase in 14:2 can hardly refer to the temple because Jesus said He was going to prepare a place for His followers and then return for them.

“Dwelling places” renders the word *μοναί*, derived from *μένω*, “to abide, dwell, remain.” The verb *μένω* occurs more often in John’s writings than in any other Gospel (forty times in the Gospel of John and twenty-four times in 1 John). Thus it is fitting that Jesus would refer to heaven in this way, as the place where His followers would dwell or abide with Him forever. The singular use of *μονή* occurs in John 14:23, where Jesus said that He and God the Father will “make Our abode” with the one who loves and obeys Him. Here the word *μονή* speaks of Jesus’ abiding in fellowship with obedient believers. This of course differs from the “dwelling places” that are in the Father’s house.

⁹ Craig Keener sees these “dwelling places” as “rooms” in the new temple (Ezek. 44:9–16), “where only undefiled ministers would have a place.” He then interprets the reference figuratively as “being in Christ, where God’s presence dwells” (cf. John 2:21; 14:23) (*JVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993], 299). A more likely cultural background can be found in the fact that fathers and soon-to-be-married sons normally added small apartments (“dwelling places”) to their homes so that they could be together in an ever-increasing expanded family.

¹⁰ “The future *παραλήμφομαι*, with the explanatory clause *ἵνα . . . ἦτε*, demands a future meaning for the present *ἐρχομαι*” (C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John*, 2d ed. [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978], 457). See also George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 249–51.

worthless) information if He did not intend to take them there. The foregoing context thus requires the conclusion that He intends to take them to heaven—where He “will be” (*εἰμι* is also a futuristic present here). Second, Jesus then said, “You know the way where I am going” (v. 4). Unless Jesus was being intentionally devious, it must be assumed that He was still speaking of heaven. In fact, following Thomas’s question about the way (v. 5), Jesus candidly stated that no one is able to go “to the Father” except through Him (v. 6).

Thus Christ will go to heaven (His ascension), then return literally and bodily to earth for His people, and take them literally to heaven with Him (at the rapture) to be with Him. Some exegetes object that since the word “heaven” is not in the passage, the emphasis of the text is on Christ’s promise that believers will ultimately (and always) be with Him—wherever that is—so that the promise should not be understood as necessarily implying a rapture “to heaven.”¹¹ In this view the rapture will occur at the same time as Christ’s coming to the earth, so that the words “where I am” would refer to His being on the earth during the millennium, not in heaven. This explanation, however, does not take into account the preceding context, as well as the conversation that follows it.

The apostles had begun to show fear in response to Jesus’ statements about His coming departure. In answer to a question from Peter, Jesus said, “Where I go, you cannot follow Me now; but you shall follow later,” to which Peter replied, “Lord, why can I not follow You right now?” (13:36–37). This led Jesus to begin the current discussion with the statement, “Let not your heart be troubled” (14:1). Here Christ clearly spoke of the rapture as an antidote to their fears and as a great hope and encouragement in light of His soon departure to heaven.¹² Jesus made no mention of suffering or judgment from which the rapture might rescue them, nor did He mention that any signs must precede the rapture. Jesus’ words spoke directly of a reunion of the apostles with their Lord, which will issue in an eternal “at-home-ness” with both Jesus and God the Father.

In addition this passage cannot refer to Christ’s second coming to the earth, since at that time Christ will rule on earth rather

¹¹ Douglas J. Moo, “Response” to Paul D. Feinberg, in *Three Views on the Rapture*, 100.

¹² Contrast Jesus’ counsel to those present on earth during the Tribulation to flee from persecution (Matt. 24:15–22).

than return to heaven with His people. In fact on the occasion of the Second Coming no one is depicted as going from earth to heaven.¹³ The events depicted in Matthew 25 and Revelation 20 are not possible in John 14:1–3, and no intervening event such as a time of tribulation is even hinted at in John 14.

1 THESSALONIANS 1:9–10

“For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come.”

Three time periods are described here, and the Thessalonian believers had participated or would participate in all of them. First, when Paul visited them with the gospel, they “turned to God from idols,” that is, they responded to Christ by faith and were born again. Second, they were now serving “a living and true God” (rather than the idols and false gods they formerly worshiped), as they waited for Christ to return from heaven. Third, one day Jesus will appear out of heaven and rescue them “from the wrath which is to come” (ἐκ τῆς ὀργῆς τῆς ἐρχομένης).

What “wrath to come” is this? Since Christ’s appearance “out of heaven” is later described in 4:15–17 as the rapture, this “coming wrath” must be the same wrath described in 5:3, 9, God’s wrath in the future Tribulation.¹⁴ The general context of both Thessalonian epistles is the Day of the Lord, especially that aspect of God’s judgment that precedes and leads up to Christ’s second coming. Indeed, the fact that 1:10 calls it a “coming wrath” implies that the “rescue” is related to Christ’s return.

In what sense will believers be rescued from this wrath? Paul wrote that they will be rescued “from,” “out of,” or “away from” the coming wrath. The UBS⁴ text, following three Alexandrian manuscripts, reads ἐκ τῆς ὀργῆς. Wallace, however, argues that the internal evidence strongly supports as original the reading ἀπό τῆς ὀργῆς,¹⁵ which implies that Christ will keep believers “away from” the coming wrath. “On all fronts the internal evidence is decidedly

¹³ See John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 71.

¹⁴ See William K. Harrison, “The Time of the Rapture as Indicated in Certain Scriptures—Part I,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 114 (October–December 1957): 319.

¹⁵ Daniel B. Wallace, “A Textual Problem in 1 Thessalonians 1:10: ‘Ἐκ τῆς ὀργῆς vs. ‘Ἀπό τῆς ὀργῆς,’” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147 (October–December 1990): 478.

in favor of *ἀπό*. There are many good reasons why a scribe would change *ἀπό* to *ἐκ*, and virtually nothing to argue in the other direction. To answer the question, ‘Which reading best explains the rise of the others(s)?’ *ἀπό* must be judged as the obvious originator of *ἐκ*. This writer would give *ἀπό* an A-rating on internal probability.”¹⁶

Even apart from the strength of the *ἀπό* reading, the statement points to a deliverance before wrath begins. The attempt by many nonpretribulation expositors to interpret this wrath as God’s final judgment illustrates the point. To say that the point of this passage is to show that salvation by Christ provides a present deliverance that will keep believers “out of” the final wrath and judgment of God makes it necessary that one interpret the deliverance as total and complete. In other words the saved will not be touched at all by God’s final wrath.¹⁷ If the same explanation of *ἐκ* or *ἀπό* is used with regard to the believer’s deliverance from the coming eschatological wrath (the Tribulation, as depicted in 1 Thess. 5), the present passage must be viewed as providing strong evidence for Paul’s belief in an imminent rapture.

Some say that the participle which names Jesus as the One who rescues (*τὸν ρυόμενον*) believers (since it is a present tense) must denote a current, progressive deliverance from God’s general (noneschatological) wrath. However, this misunderstands both the relevance of the tense of the articular participle and the meaning of the final participle (*τῆς ἐρχομένης*, “coming”). The participle *ρυόμενον* may be considered timeless with the force of a substantive.¹⁸ As Bruce puts it, “the participle plays the part of a *nomen agentis*, ‘our deliverer’” (as in Romans 11:26, where *ὁ ρυόμενος* is usually translated “the Deliverer”).¹⁹ On the other hand the present participle here could be futuristic, making it similar to the phrase *ἀπὸ τῆς μελλούσης ὀργῆς* (“from the coming wrath”) in the preaching of John the Baptist (Matt. 3:7; Luke 3:7). The closing participle, *τῆς ἐρχομένης*, seems clearly to be futuristic. This would allow a close connection between the future deliverance and the fact that the

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Leon Morris, *The Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 42. See also D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles* (Chicago: Moody, 1971), 75.

¹⁸ Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles*, 72.

¹⁹ F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 19–20.

object of the deliverance is a wrath which itself is still “coming.”

In any event 1 Thessalonians 1:9–10 seems to function as Paul’s “apostolic kerygma,” imparted to the infant church while Paul was still in Thessalonica. It serves as a “summary of the eschatological teaching Paul had given, which finds its expansion and further explanation in 4:13–5:11.”²⁰

1 THESSALONIANS 5:4–9

“But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day should overtake you like a thief; for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober. For those who sleep do their sleeping at night, and those who get drunk get drunk at night. But since we are of the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Paul began this section by assuring his readers that they knew “the times and the epochs” (5:1) and did not need any new information on the subject from him. They knew “very well” (accurately), for example, that “the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night” (5:2). The wrath of that day is the same as that of 1:10, described here as coming as suddenly and unexpectedly as “labor pains on a pregnant woman” (5:3, NIV). Unbelievers (“they”) will not escape that wrath.

That the “destruction” described in verse 3 is that of the Tribulation as a whole and not the “day of vengeance” accompanying Christ’s second coming (2 Thess. 1:7–9) or God’s later judgment of the lost (Rev. 20:11–15) is indicated by the fact that those who will suffer this destruction are quoted as saying, “Peace and safety,” just before the calamity suddenly and violently comes on them. It is unthinkable that near the end of the Tribulation or during the outpouring of heavenly signs (Rev. 6–19) or at the time of God’s final judgment people could be saying anything resembling “peace and safety.”²¹ Men will be “fainting from fear” during the Tribulation (Luke 21:25–27), and there is no reason to think that those who “shall not escape” (2 Thess. 5:3) will find Christ’s judgment any more comforting.

Beginning in 1 Thessalonians 5:4 Paul contrasted the situation of believers with that of unbelievers, inserting the pronouns “you”

²⁰ Wallace, “A Textual Problem in 1 Thessalonians 1:10,” 479.

²¹ See Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation*, 117.

and “we” (vv. 4–5). As Feinberg puts it, “The day of the Lord will overtake the unbelievers as a thief in the night because of their general moral state, which is spoken of as night, or darkness. Believers, on the other hand, will not be surprised as they are of light and the day.”²² In addition, the contrast between the “you” of verses 1–2, 4–5, and the “they” of verse 3 (“they shall not escape”) strongly implies that the church *will* escape, and that is one reason Paul had no need to discuss the “times and epochs” of the rapture (v. 1).

These contrasts are followed in verses 6–8 with exhortations to be alert and sober (self-controlled), living in faith, love, and a confidence in salvation, since this is the lifestyle that is fitting for the day (cf. Rom. 13:12–13). Drunkenness and sleep characterize behavior in the night, but alertness and soberness are typical for daytime (cf. 1 Pet. 5:8).²³ Then in 1 Thessalonians 5:9 Paul reaffirmed the fact that God has not destined believers to suffer this eschatological wrath, but he affirmed that they have been appointed to obtain salvation through Christ. This salvation is further defined in verse 10 as including an eternal “living together” with Christ, thus showing that it is parallel to the “rescue” of 1:10 and the “catching up” (rapture) of 4:17 (“thus we shall always be with the Lord”).

According to 5:2, it is the “day of the Lord,” not specifically the destruction, that will “come as a thief in the night.” The destruction will be the evidence of the “day.” This Day of the Lord is apparently a period of time that will include the millennium as well as the Tribulation. The church, Paul said, is not subject to darkness so as to be surprised by the coming of the Lord’s day, but is associated with light and daytime (vv. 5:4–5, 8). Day and night cannot exist at the same time in the same way in the same place. But here one group (the church) is always of the day, and the other group (unbelievers) is trapped in the night and is destined to suffer God’s eschatological wrath.²⁴ It is certainly possible to see the day and night as representing “coexisting spiritual conditions.” But to say that the Day of the Lord will come on the church, which is of the day, in the same way and at the same time that it will come on unbelievers, who are “in the night,” would seem to contradict Paul’s

²² Paul D. Feinberg, “The Case for the Pretribulation Rapture Position,” in *Three Views on the Rapture*, 53–54.

²³ Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 111–12.

²⁴ Walvoord puts it this way: “The implication is quite clear that believers are in a different time reference, namely, that they belong to the day that precedes the darkness” (*The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation*, 117).

specific declaration that it will come "like a thief in the night" and to make worthless his counsel to stay alert, watchful, and sober.²⁵

It seems evident that Paul presented salvation here as an alternative to the wrath to be manifested in the Tribulation. The purpose of this salvation is that believers will live with Christ (v. 10), which therefore has the same results as the rapture in 4:17. Even the words of encouragement and comfort in 5:11 ("Therefore encourage one another [*παρακαλεῖτε ἀλλήλους*] and build up one another") are identical with those in 4:18 ("Therefore comfort one another [*παρακαλεῖτε ἀλλήλους*] with these words"). Paul clearly taught that a rapture will occur and that it will include all living believers (1 Cor. 15:51; 1 Thess. 4:17). The fact that in 1 Thessalonians 5 Paul described the rapture as part of the outworking of the salvation that will deliver the church from God's eschatological wrath (the Tribulation) shows that for Paul the means of saving the church from the wrath of the Tribulation (or Day of the Lord) is specifically the rapture.

According to Matthew 24 and Revelation 6 and 13, believers on earth during the Tribulation will experience extreme suffering and many of them will be martyred. No further earthly injury can be done to someone than to take his or her life. Martyrdom is therefore the supreme result of the wrath of God's enemies. But martyrdom cannot be thought of as delivery or "rescue" from the coming wrath. If the church finds itself in the Tribulation, then at least some believers will not be delivered, since they would be martyred. This seems contrary to the teaching of 1 Thessalonians 1:10 and 5:9, where no exceptions to the rescue are indicated or implied. The promise of deliverance by the rapture is for the entire church. People who become believers during the Tribulation and are martyred will thereby be "delivered" from denial or apostasy, but this is not the wrath spoken of here. Paul's promise is that the church will be literally and actually delivered from the coming wrath.

If the rapture is not imminent, then Paul's exhortation to the Thessalonians to "watch and be sober" (5:6) is unrealistic and his assertion that the church is not appointed to wrath (v. 9) is misleading.

1 CORINTHIANS 1:7

"You are not lacking in any gift, awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ."

²⁵ The concepts suggested here are elaborated in greater detail by Harrison, "The Time of the Rapture," 320-21.

In Romans 8:18 Paul wrote that the Christians' coming glorification will far surpass the suffering they experience in this life. Believers "groan" within themselves as they "eagerly await" the "redemption of their bodies" (v. 23). Paul explained that they "eagerly await" this hope with perseverance (v. 25). The verb *ἀπεκδέχομαι* ("await eagerly or expectantly," "look forward eagerly"),²⁶ found also in 1 Corinthians 1:7, is always used of Christian hope in the New Testament,²⁷ and Paul used it only in eschatological contexts.²⁸

Why did the Corinthians need to be reminded that they were eagerly looking forward to the revelation or "unveiling" (*ἀποκάλυψις*) of Christ? Fee suggests that they had an "overrealized eschatological understanding of their existence," connected to their experience of tongues.²⁹ However, Paul may have been foreshadowing his later warning that the day is coming when the very spiritual gifts on which the Corinthians had focused will cease and be put aside when (or by the time that) "the perfect comes" (13:10).

Bible scholars differ on the meaning of "the perfect" (*τὸ τέλειον*), but it may have something to do with Christ's return for the church and His ushering in of a new (glorious) kind of existence for them, in which believers will know Him and His will perfectly and completely. As Fee puts it, "at the coming of Christ . . . those gifts now necessary [perhaps better, 'useful'] for the building up of the church in the present age will disappear, because 'the complete' will have come."³⁰ In 1:7 Paul wanted believers to focus on Christ, rather than on themselves and their (temporary) gifts (see also 1:17–18, 30–31; 2:2). The word *ἀποκάλυψις* sometimes refers to the rapture and other times to the Second Coming.³¹ The believers' ea-

²⁶ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), 1:296.

²⁷ Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2d ed., rev. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 83.

²⁸ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 42, n. 36.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 646.

³¹ John F. Walvoord, "New Testament Words for the Lord's Coming," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 101 (July–September 1944): 286–87. As Sproule notes, the term *ἀποκάλυψις* is not a technical term that refers only to the Second Coming (*In Defense of Pre-tribulationism*, 18). See also Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, 172–73.

ger anticipation (*ἀπεκδέχομαι*) for Jesus' coming (1 Cor. 1:7) may suggest an imminent rapture.

TITUS 2:13

"Looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus."

Why did Paul describe Christ's return as "the blessed hope" (*τὴν μακαρίαν ἐλπίδα*)? Since the word *μακάριος* means "happy,"³² and since the article *τὴν* is most likely fulfilling either a par excellence ("in a class by itself") function or a monadic ("one of a kind") function,³³ Paul's terminology here strongly implies that "the blessed hope," as the Christian's ultimate hope, is the rapture presented as a totally positive and joyful expectation.

Some pretribulationists interpret this passage as referring to the second coming of Christ rather than the rapture, because of Paul's use of the word *ἐπιφάνεια* ("appearing"). However, all four uses of the term in the Pastoral Epistles (1 Tim. 6:14; 2 Tim. 4:1, 8; Titus 2:13) present the appearing of Christ as a joyous expectation apart from signs or tribulation. Thus it most likely refers to the rapture.

Others have related this event to Christ's posttribulation second coming because the verse states that His appearing will be a "glorious appearing," which, some suggest, can refer only to the manifestation of an exalted and glorious Christ to the entire world (Matt. 16:27; 19:28; 24:30; 25:31). However, though the world will not see Christ's glory until His second coming, the church will experience His glory when it meets Him in the air (Rom. 5:2; 1 Cor. 15:43; Phil. 3:21; Col. 3:4; 1 Pet. 5:1; 1 John 3:2). This "glory" may be either an attributive genitive ("glorious appearing") or a subjective genitive (the glory that "appears"). Either way there is nothing in the passage that restricts this appearing to Christ's second coming.³⁴

The fact that in Titus 2:13 Paul exhorted believers to look for Jesus' coming as the "happy," blessed hope (confident expectation) for the church, without any mention of preceding signs or Tribulation, strongly implies the imminence of this event—that it can occur at any time. It is a weak argument to say that the context of

³² Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 486.

³³ See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 222–24, for descriptions and other examples.

³⁴ Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, 173.

this passage makes any reference to signs inappropriate,³⁵ since Paul could easily have introduced the idea of tribulation and persecution and watching for signs as he spoke of the “present age,” just as Jesus did in Matthew 24. The exhortation to “watch” or “look” for what is the hope of the church loses its significance if it may not arrive “at any moment.”³⁶

1 JOHN 3:2–3

“Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that, when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.”

In seeking to motivate Christians to purify themselves from sin and lawlessness (see 1 John 3:4–11), John reminded his readers that when Jesus appears, they will become like Him. This is the Christian’s hope, and all who have their hope founded on Christ and His return will purify themselves now (in progressive sanctification) in order to become like Christ (Rom. 8:29).

If a person expects important guests to arrive momentarily, he or she may be busily engaged in cleaning the house and making every possible preparation for the arrival—perhaps focusing with great eagerness on “purifying” the house and making it ready. The hope is realistic and motivational in proportion to its imminence.³⁷ While it is certainly true that a Christian has other motivations for purification and obedience than simply the imminent hope of the rapture, it must be admitted that if Jesus’ coming is imminent, the exhortation for Christians to purify themselves in light of Christ’s return is most significant. As Walvoord puts it, “The teaching of the coming of the Lord for the church is always presented as an imminent event which should occupy the Christian’s thought and life to a large extent.”³⁸

³⁵ Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, 36–37.

³⁶ Earl Radmacher writes, “If . . . there are specific prophesied signs, in reality we would not be looking for the Savior at any moment but instead should be watching for the revelation of the Man of Sin, the Great Tribulation, etc.” (“The Imminent Return of the Lord,” *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 4 [July 1998]: 20).

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, 75. Gleason Archer suggests that a comparison of this passage with Revelation 19:7–8, 14 proves that by the time Jesus leaves heaven for earth at His second coming the church will have been raptured, purified, and glorified, and have joined Christ’s armies (dressed in white clothing) for His victorious return to earth (“The Case for the Mid-Seventieth-Week Rapture Position,” in *Three Views on the Rapture*, 119–20).

In 1 John the connection between an expectation of Christ's return and the purification of the believer's life has already been hinted at in 2:28 (abiding in Christ for confidence and lack of shame when He appears). Now in 3:2 John established a sequence of events: (1) Jesus will appear, (2) believers will see Him just as He is, and (3) they will become like Him. Taken together, these three points are a description of the essential elements of the rapture. The phrase *ἐὰν φανερωθῆ* ("when/if he appears") is exactly the same as that used to describe Christ's coming for believers in 2:28, and it alludes to Jesus' coming to glorify the church. At the moment of Christ's appearing, all believers will become "like Him"—conformed entirely to the likeness of God's Son. "The complete transformation of the Christian into the likeness of Jesus awaits the moment of seeing him 'as he really is.'"³⁹

But such a character-changing vision of Christ cannot be isolated from individual Christian responsibility here on earth. The imminence of that future vision has practical implications for the present time. The hope for the future is an incentive to purity of living in the present. This purity involves the rejection of sin (3:4-9). Keeping pure is endeavoring to stay free from sin (3:3). The hope of becoming like Christ when He appears should inspire Christlike character now. And it will, especially if that hope remains truly imminent.

REVELATION 22:7, 12, 20

"And behold, I am coming quickly. Blessed is he who heeds the words of the prophecy of this book. . . . Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done.' . . . He who testifies to these things says, 'Yes, I am coming quickly.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus."

Three times in Revelation 22, Christ promised that He is coming quickly (*ἰδοὺ ἔρχομαι ταχύ*).⁴⁰ The word *ταχύς* is an adjective meaning "quick" or "swift." The form *ταχύ*, a neuter singular, is used as an adverb, with two major meanings: "quickly, without delay," and "soon, in a short time."⁴¹ The meaning generally proposed for the occurrences in Revelation is "quickly." The major problem, of course, is that if Christ's promises are taken literally, it

³⁹ Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1984), 147.

⁴⁰ The word *ταχύ*, "quickly," is also used of Christ's coming in 2:16 and 3:11.

⁴¹ Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 807.

seems that He was off the mark when He said He was coming back “soon,” or else He had an unusual view of the meaning of the word. Commentators differ in how they resolve this difficulty. Some speak of a “foreshortened perspective on the time of the end.”⁴² Others say that John should not be held to the standards of a systematic theologian, and was simply attempting to “motivate his audience to respond to Christ immediately and properly in the light of his soon and sudden return.”⁴³

Most likely the promises point to the rapture as being imminent and ready to occur “at any moment.” The word *ταχύ* suggests the suddenness of Christ’s coming whenever it occurs. A related promise in Revelation is found at 16:15: “I am coming like a thief.” Beale suggests that the idea of a “swift, unexpected appearance” is included, especially with respect to the “possibility that Jesus could come at any time.”⁴⁴ The promises thus assume imminence, and the probability of a reference to the rapture is strengthened by the reference to Christ’s rewards in 22:12 (based on works, as at the judgment seat of Christ; 2 Cor. 5:10–11).

CONCLUSION

These passages that promise the rapture of the church all teach, imply, or allow for imminence as an event that can occur “at any moment.” The purpose of most of these passages is to encourage believers concerning the hope that awaits them or to motivate them to pursue holiness in anticipation of seeing Christ soon. As Feinberg notes, “there is no mention of any signs or events that precede the rapture of the church in any of the rapture passages. The point seems to be that the believer prior to this event is to look, not for some sign, but the Lord from heaven.”⁴⁵

⁴² Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 404.

⁴³ Robert W. Wall, *Revelation*, New International Bible Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 263.

⁴⁴ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 1135.

⁴⁵ Feinberg, “The Case for the Pretribulation Rapture Position,” in *Three Views on the Rapture*, 80.



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