

ESCHATOLOGY: DOCTRINE OF LAST THINGS

PART 48

THE RAPTURE, PART 3

What does it mean when the Rapture is said to be imminent? In English, imminent means about to happen, likely to occur at any moment, or impending. It is from Latin *immineo* or *imminere* meaning to jut out, project, overhang. “Thus, an immanent event is one that is always hanging overhead, is constantly ready to befall or overtake a person, is always close at hand in the sense that it could happen at any moment. Other things *may* happen before the imminent event, but nothing else *must* take place before it happens. If something else must take place before an event can happen, that event is not imminent. The necessity of something else taking place first destroys the concept of imminency.” [Renald Showers, *Marantha Our Lord, Come! A Definitive Study of the Rapture of the Church*, p. 127]. We know that an imminent event will occur, but we don't know exactly when it will occur.

The early church up to about the fourth century, believed the return of the Lord to earth was imminent. They were looking for the Second Coming to establish the Kingdom and not the Rapture, but their outlook was clearly premillennial. Many of them wrote about it including Papias, Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Methodus, Commodianus, and Lactantius. Some church leaders began questioning it as early as the end of the second century, but until Constantine, the church was mostly premillennial and expecting the imminent return of the Lord. Once Constantine proclaimed his faith in Christ Jesus and became a Christian, the persecution of the church ended and church and state were eventually unified. This led to complacency and people became unconcerned about the return of Christ because they had pretty good lives here and it remained that way until the Reformation. Calvin and the Reformers reclaimed the doctrine of the imminent return of Christ at the Second Coming. When Whitby introduced postmillennial doctrines in the beginning of the eighteenth century, imminency was once again set aside, not completely, but to a large extent, because they thought the 1,000 years must occur before His coming. Wesley and Whitefield both believed in the imminent return of Christ, but again, they believed it would be in connection with the Second Coming. As noted last week, some people throughout church history have understood the doctrine of the Rapture, but until Darby it really wasn't well known. As dispensational theology unveiled the mysteries of Eschatology to many Christians, knowledge of the doctrine became more widespread and accepted as biblical truth.

Since the time of the event is unknown, we must always be prepared for it to happen at any time. No date may be set for it to happen—ever, because that is not known. Do not believe any person who says they know when the Rapture is going to take place; they do not know. We can observe events occurring around us that seem to suggest it

may not be long, but we don't really know. Our finite view of time is not the same view God has of time and space. No one can say that an imminent event can happen soon in the sense we think of soon in English, however, the word "soon" as it was used in the book of Revelation has caused a lot of exegetical consternation.

The use of the word *τάχος*, soon, in Revelation seems to have a bearing on imminence. The Greek word does mean soon or quickly but in the human view of time, that hasn't happened soon and clearly hasn't happened almost two-thousand years later. "The time is near," *καιρός ἐγγύς*, also has the same significance. While I don't think we can discount the nature of time as seen from the disparate perceptions of divine and human senses, imminence seems to be the primary meaning. In other words, God's perspective of "soon" and the human perception of "soon" are two different concepts and we probably shouldn't completely discount that idea, but that isn't the primary meaning of soon as used here. The word as used in Revelation seems to mean imminence rather than the suggestion that something is going to happen soon in terms of our perception of time. Holding onto the meaning of time as we understand the word "soon" in English has led to serious theological error. Preterism rests much of its theology on the fact that "soon" meant soon as we understand the concept; therefore, Christ must have come back in 70 A.D. otherwise he didn't come soon and, they think, the Scriptures are proved faulty which, of course, cannot be possible.

Revelation 1:1, 3 ¹The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must soon [*τάχος*] take place; and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John... ³Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near [*καιρός ἐγγύς*].

The New Testament clearly views this age as the precursor to things that are next and are soon to come to pass and these expressions are contrary to our finite view of time. The doctrine of imminence is just as valid today as it was when the New Testament was written; the apostles certainly thought the Lord could return at any moment. However, as noted, the early church thought the Second Coming was imminent and we know it is the Rapture that is imminent. They simply had not had the time to widely develop Eschatology which came much later in biblical history although we noted some historical exceptions to that in last week's lesson. The final end times events are not imminent because before the end comes there are things that must take place. Among them are the Rapture of the church and the return of the Jews to the land in unbelief. The return of the Jews to the land in unbelief did not have to happen before the Rapture and the fact that it did does not conflict with the imminence of the Rapture; the return could have happened after. Imminence does not preclude other things happening before the imminent event, it simply mandates anything else happening beforehand. The appearance of Antichrist, the covenant made with Israel, the Tribulation, and the Second Coming cannot happen before the Rapture of the church. Overall, the Bible can seem to present the view that the end is imminent, but a

proper understanding of imminence proves that to be a faulty doctrine. The Rapture is imminent; the final end events may be near but they are not imminent.

Hebrews 1:2 ²in these last days [ἔσχατος ὁ ἡμέρα] has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world.

Last days, ἔσχατος ὁ ἡμέρα, refers to the last in a series. Dispensational theology views biblical history as a series of successive ways God has been and will be dealing with mankind. The days of history as we know it are about to end; history is moving to its climax and then the Kingdom will begin. The time when that will happen is unknown, but the final, climax of the last days, the end time events, the Tribulation and the Second Coming, cannot happen until after the Rapture takes place. In terms of our finite, human understanding of these things concerning the last days, they can, on the surface, appear to be contradictory, but they are not. The Rapture is imminent and once it happens, the end times events will be next up in the prophetic, historical timeline. We have to understand the Rapture as an end time event that is distinct from the final end times events that can only follow it and cannot precede it.

1 John 2:18 ¹⁸Children, it is the last hour [ἔσχατος ὥρα]; and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have appeared; from this we know that it is the last hour [ἔσχατος ὥρα].

Last hour, ἔσχατος ὥρα, represents the same concept as "last days."

Philippians 3:20 ²⁰For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait [ἀπεκδέχομαι] for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ;

Eagerly waiting for indicates intensely expecting the return of the Lord. The word ἀπεκδέχομαι means to await eagerly or expectantly for some future event; to wait for; or to continue to be in a state until an expected event. It implies that other things are much less important than the thing which is expected to happen. Paul presented a contrast with those who have their minds fixed on secular earthly things with those who long for and expect the Lord to return for them. This Scripture concerns imminence. It is also an encouragement for the kind of mindset we are to have here and now.

1 Thessalonians 1:10 ¹⁰and to wait for [ἀναμένω] His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come.

Wait for, ἀναμένω, means to remain in a place and/or state with expectancy concerning a future event which characterizes the concept of imminence. Waiting for something implies an expectation that it will come. In the context, the Thessalonians were expecting the Lord to come; they were not to expect the coming of wrath or Antichrist. And we shouldn't be waiting for anything other than His return either. We are not appointed to wrath.

James 5:7–9⁷Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord....⁸You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near [ἤγγικεν from ἐγγίζω].⁹Do not complain, brethren, against one another, so that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing [ἔστηκεν from ἵστημι] right at the door.

Both “near” and “standing” are in the perfect tense meaning those things were taking place when James wrote his epistle and they are still taking place. The Lord’s coming is imminent.

In Dr. Thomas’ commentary concerning Revelation 1:1, he writes that from the divine standpoint of the progression of events, “soon” and “the time is near” mean these things are imminent and not necessarily soon to occur as we define soon or quickly happening once they begin as some define these words. When Daniel predicted end times events, he said these things would take place “in the latter days” (Dan. 2:28). When teaching His disciples the truths of the Tribulation, Jesus said “that is not yet the end” (Mt. 24:6; Mark 13:7; Luke 21:9). But in the book of Revelation, John changes the focus to “soon.” The purpose of John was not to say the events would happen right away in terms of time or to set a time limit. “The presence of *en tachei* [soon] in [Revelation] 1:1 shows that for the first time the events predicted by Daniel and foreseen by Christ stood in readiness to be fulfilled. Therefore, John could speak of them as imminent, but earlier prophets could not.” [Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary*, p. 1:56]. While I think Dr. Thomas’ final comment has some merit, he arrives at it by attaching imminence to what are Tribulation events, the subject of both Daniel and the Lord, and that isn’t correct. They may be near but they are not imminent. This points out just how easy it is to get tripped up by the concepts around these words that are related to time as we know it. By being tethered to what is finite, we are handicapped when trying to understand infinite issues.

There seem to be three primary interpretations of the meaning of “soon” none of which, in my mind, are very satisfactory. Preterists claim soon means all the events of the book of Revelation took place during the lifetimes of John’s original audience. This concept of soon conforms to the human perception of time that the word means. However, they contradict themselves when the same word is used in Revelation 22:6-7 to refer to the Second Coming which still hasn’t happened and they acknowledge that fact. They are trying to have it both ways; in Revelation 1:1 they want to say soon refers to elapsed time but in Revelation 22:6-7 it doesn’t have that sense of a short period of time. Others think it means that the events are in the distant future, but which take place very quickly once they start to happen. The problem is the word doesn’t carry that meaning. Third, it may denote closeness of time but from God’s perspective. I’m suggesting there is a fourth way to look at this issue and that is understanding the meaning to be referring to imminence.

Dr. Garland quoted Monty S. Mills addressing this issue from his exposition on the book of Revelation. Mills is a proponent of understanding time either from God's perspective or that the events will rapidly occur once they get started. "The Greek noun translated 'shortly' is used only twice in Revelation, once in Rev. 1:1 and again in 22:6, thus effectively bracketing the whole book. The prophecies bracketed by these 'shortlys' include letters addressed to churches that existed two millennia ago (chapters 2-3), clear descriptions of Christ's physical return to this earth (Rev. 1:7; 19:19-27 [sic; obviously an error; should have been 19:11-16]), and a prediction of His reign on earth for one thousand years (Rev. 20:4). Both uses of this word, then, must be understood as having the same sense and yet embrace, at the absolute minimum, a period of nearly three millennia. Therefore, only two interpretations present themselves: either, when the events start occurring they will proceed rapidly, or that the whole sweep of history is seen from a divine perspective in which one thousand years is as but a day (2 Pe. 3:8)." [Monty S. Mills quoted by Tony Garland, *A Testimony of Jesus Christ*, p. 1:164].

Mounce claims that it is a "verbal scam" to say the reference is to marking time from a divine perspective. He believes it refers to imminence. "The most satisfying solution is to take the expression, 'must soon take place' in a straightforward sense, remembering that in the prophetic outlook the end is always imminent. Time as a chronological sequence is of secondary concern in prophecy. This perspective is common to the entire NT." [Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 41]. This view accounts for the meaning of the Greek and allows that meaning to be understood in the normal manner.

MacArthur also understands the words to be referring to imminence. "In all those cases *tachos* (or words related to it) clearly refers to the imminence or nearness of an event, not the speed at which it happens.... Thus, the things which must soon take place about which John wrote do not happen in a brief time span, but are imminent." [John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Revelation 1-11*, p. 1:21].

Ladd, who does not support the doctrine of the Rapture, nevertheless had an interesting view of the prophets and the doctrine of imminence. "However, the simple meaning cannot be avoided [the meaning of soon]. The problem is raised by the fact that the prophets were little interested in chronology, and the future was always viewed as imminent. We pointed out in the introduction that the Old Testament prophets blended the near and the distant perspectives so as to form a single canvas. Biblical prophecy is not primarily three-dimensional but two; it has height and breadth but is little concerned about depth, i.e., the chronology of future events. There is in biblical prophecy a tension between the immediate and the distant future; the distant is viewed through the transparency of the immediate. It is true that the early church lived in expectancy of the return of the Lord, and it is the nature of biblical prophecy to make it possible for every generation to live in expectancy of the end. To relax and say 'where is the promise of his coming?' is to become a scoffer of divine truth. The 'biblical' attitude is 'take heed, watch, for you do not know when the time will come'

(Mark 13:33).” [George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, pp. 22-23].

I don't believe the prophets always viewed the future as imminent, but it's safe to say they did at times. Partly, that depends on the subject of the prophecy; some was near term and some was long term. I would certainly say Mounce and Ladd are incorrect when they claim chronology wasn't a matter of interest to the prophets, but instead I would say it was a matter of revelation, or, more accurately, the lack of revelation; in fact, the prophets wanted to know the details but they weren't always provided (1 Peter 1:10-11). God simply did not reveal everything to them even though they may have longed to know it including the chronology. Peter wrote about this concerning salvation, but they didn't know all the details of the end times either.

1 Peter 1:10–11 ¹⁰As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful searches and inquiries, ¹¹seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow.

Why is the doctrine of imminence important to believers now? “The imminent coming of Christ should have an incredible practical effect on the lives of individual Christians and the church as a whole. The fact that the glorified, holy Son of God could step through the door of heaven at any moment is intended by God to be the most pressing, incessant motivation for holy living and aggressive ministry (including missions, evangelism, and Bible teaching) and the greatest cure for lethargy and apathy. It should make a difference in every Christian's values, actions, priorities, and goals.” [Renald Showers, *Maranatha Our Lord Come! A Definitive Study of the Rapture of the Church*, pp. 147-148]. That is well said! John addressed this issue.

1 John 3:2–3 ²Beloved, 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. ³And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.

Some people put the Rapture into the Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24:36-44. Dr. Hart, a Moody Bible Institute professor [John F. Hart, *Evidence for the Rapture: A Biblical Case for Pretribulationism*, pp. 45-71], and Dr. Fruchtenbaum [Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Footsteps of the Messiah: A Study of the Sequence of Prophetic Events*, pp. 640-642] may be the most well-known premillennial dispensationalists to hold this position. Posttribulationists make the same argument but for different reasons.

Matthew 24:32–35 ³²“Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near; ³³so, you too, when you see all these things, recognize that He is near, right at the door. ³⁴“Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. ³⁵“Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away.

Matthew 24:36–44 ³⁶“But of [περὶ δὲ] that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone. ³⁷“For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah. ³⁸“For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, ³⁹and they did not understand until the flood came and took [αἶρω] them all away; so will the coming of the Son of Man be. ⁴⁰“Then there will be two men in the field; one will be taken [παραλαμβάνω] and one will be left. ⁴¹“Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken [παραλαμβάνω] and one will be left. ⁴²“Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming. ⁴³“But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. ⁴⁴“For this reason you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will.

The first and most important detail to remember when interpreting the Olivet Discourse is that it pertains to Israel and not to the church. It would be incongruous to put the church into a couple of verses right in the middle apart from the entire context of these two chapters (Mt. 24-25). Not only the immediate context, but the context of both chapters concerns Israel, the Tribulation or the time of Jacob's distress, and the Second Coming of Christ. In the immediate context of these verses, the idea is that when these Tribulation events begin to occur, the generation seeing them will not pass away and that generation will see the Second Coming of the Son of Man. It is not exegetically reasonable to conclude then that the Lord was talking about events in the Tribulation followed by the Second Coming interspersed with something else, the Rapture, that takes place at least seven years before His return. The Lord is talking about the period of time when Israel is experiencing divine discipline from God under which the nation will turn to Christ in faith and it is the time of God's wrath exercised against a satanic world system and the Gentiles embracing that system. The church has nothing to do with these issues; the church is gone, has enjoyed the marriage ceremony with Christ, the head of the church, and is awaiting the time to return with Him at the Second Coming.

The real problem with reading the Rapture into these verses is the failure to maintain dispensational distinctions and to put the church into the context of Matthew as a book when it doesn't fit in there. These are hermeneutical issues that shouldn't happen among dispensational exegetes since we lay claim to being the ones who rightly divide the Word of God. Obviously, these men (Hart and Fruchtenbaum and the others who have this position) do have what they would call exegetical explanations for their position, but in my opinion they simply don't fit the context of either Matthew or the Olivet Discourse within the book of Matthew. Dr. Hart's exegetical explanation of his position is somewhat different than Dr. Fruchtenbaum's explanation which is to be expected if these positions are deviations from the text.

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