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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.

IMMINENCE AND THE RAPTURE

Part II

by Thomas Ice

There are a number of arguments against the doctrine of imminence that were put forth by pre-trib critic Robert Cameron in his book *Scriptural Truth About The Lord's Return*.¹ Cameron contends that a proper understanding of the New Testament meant that Christ could not have come at any moment.² In this installment, I will evaluate further more of Cameron's arguments, which have become standard objections against imminence over the years by pre-trib opponents. Cameron attempts to disprove New Testament imminency by showing that certain events must take place either during the lifetime of the Apostles or before the return of Christ could occur.

THE PROMISE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

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.³ This is a rather trivial argument and I wonder why Cameron would even make it, since it can easily be dismissed.

The church was founded upon the Day of Pentecost, which is also the same day in which Christ's promise of the Holy Spirit was fulfilled. How could Christ return for His church before the church was founded, which is what Cameron implies? So how could the fulfillment of this predicted event possibly be a legitimate obstruction to the Apostles and their belief in Christ's imminent return? Gerald Stanton notes:

Actually, Pentecost took place a mere ten days after the ascension of Christ. It must constantly be kept in mind throughout this discussion that *imminent* does not mean *immediate*, and the fact that there was a brief interval before Pentecost does not prove that it formed any barrier to the disciples' faith in the Lord's soon return.⁴

PREDICTED EVENTS IN PAUL'S LIFE

Cameron tells us that 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?"⁵ "For this reason I have often been hindered from coming to you; but now, with no further place for me in these regions, and since I have had for many years a longing to come to you whenever I go to Spain—for I hope to see you in passing, and to be helped on my way there by you, when I have first enjoyed your company for a while—but now, I am going to Jerusalem serving the saints" (Rom. 15:22–25). "Now I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me, that I may be delivered from those who are disobedient in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints; so that I may come to you in joy by the will of God and find refreshing rest in your company" (Rom. 15:30–32). Another similar passage is also cited against imminency in Acts 9:15–16, which reads as follows: "But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake.'"

When we look at these passages we do not see any thing in them that would contradict with the doctrine of imminency—that Christ could return at any moment. In the Romans 15:22–25 passage, Paul tells them why he has not yet been able to visit them but he has for many years desired to see visit them. Paul further explains in verses 30–32 that Roman believers should pray that he might be released from the circumstances preventing him from coming to visit them in Rome “by the will of God.” Nothing in the passage above indicates that Paul’s desire to visit not controlled by the will of God. Nothing in this passage says that Paul would absolutely, by the will of God, come to Rome. Paul was seeking the will of God and proper timing for his long desire on this matter. Stanton says,

All of his plans, including these proposed journeys, were contingent on the Lord’s leading and the further revelation of God’s will for his life. Thus it was that he conditioned his promise to the Ephesians, ‘But I will return again unto you, *if God will*’ (Acts 18:21). To the Christians at Rome he expressed his desire that ‘I might have a prosperous journey *by the will of God* to come to you.’ Often he had purposed to come unto them but had been hindered (Rom. 1:9, 10, 13). He wrote plainly to the Corinthians: ‘But I will come to you shortly, *if the Lord will*’ (I Cor. 4:19).⁶

It is clear that statements like those noted above that appear in the New Testament are under the control of the will of God. The timing of the prophetic events are also under the control of God’s will as noted in Acts 1:7, which says, “It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority.” It is reasonable to believe that God will coordinate His plan for history in such a way as to not bring into conflict events in the life of his Apostles with those already scheduled to occur in His prophetic plan. Every indication in the New Testament is that Paul lived his life in such a way as to seek God’s will and direction for his life, while at the same time knowing that the rapture could occur at any moment, which would leave undone some of the plans he might have had to spread the message to which he had been commissioned.

In a similar way, the example of Paul shows us that we should plan to live our lives out following the will of God, but at the same time recognizing that Christ could interrupt our life plans with the occurrence of the any-moment rapture. Hey, I sure would not complain if that glorious event were to interrupt the long-range plans that I have. The doctrine of imminence implies the possibility of an any-moment, signless coming by Christ at the rapture. Since it is signless there are no indicators when it will occur, thus, we should plan to live our lives as if we will die, but at the same time each day we are to be waiting for Him since He could come today. This is the example provided by Paul.

INTERVENING EVENTS

“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.”⁷ Posttribulationists say that prophesied events like the destruction of Jerusalem (Matt. 23:29—24:2; Mark 13:1–2; Luke 19:41–44; 21:20–24) had to happen before Christ’s return could occur. They are both right and wrong! I would argue that nothing must take place before our Lord’s return in the

clouds at the rapture must occur, but, on the other hand, hundreds of events must take place before the second coming of Jesus to planet earth can occur.

Posttribulationists like Cameron believe that there is only going to be a single return of Christ in the future. They make note of the many events that must occur before His return. Pretribulationists believe that there are many events scheduled to occur before Christ's return to the earth and they will take place before His advent, during the tribulation, but after the rapture. The post-tribers simply ignore the many passages that I listed in my previous article indicating that Christ could come at any moment, without any signs preceding His coming, as if they were not in the New Testament. They then emphasize the many events that the Bible does say will lead up to Christ's return.

For example, a passage like Matthew 24:29–30 says, "But immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken, and then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory." So we see in this passage that all the events of the tribulation, the darkening of heavenly luminaries, then the sign of the Son of Man will occur before the coming of the Son of Man (the second advent). Pretribulationists are in full agreement that signs precede the second coming, but we believe that the rapture is a separate event that is not preceded by signs, and thus, the posttribulational argument has no traction since there are two events and not one.

There is no necessity for signs before the rapture since the New Testament teaches that we are to wait for Jesus, who could come at any moment. The posttribulationist wrongly insists that there is but a single event in the future, which is preceded by signs. Therefore, the more that one recognizes the New Testament teaching of two future events (one imminent and the other not), then, they are able to harmonize properly the two sets of passages. Maranatha!

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

¹ Robert Cameron, *Scriptural Truth About The Lord's Return* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1922).

² The title of a chapter against imminence in his book: Cameron, *Scriptural Truth*, p. 21.

³ Cameron, *Scriptural Truth*, pp. 21-23.

⁴ 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. 112.

⁵ Cameron, *Scriptural Truth*, p. 41.

⁶ Stanton, *Kept from the Hour*, p. 121.

⁷ Cameron, *Scriptural Truth*, p. 68.