Imminence

Referred to by some as the Doctrine of Imminence, and claimed by John Walvoord as “the heart of pre-tribulationism (The Rapture Question, 53),” imminence, and the evidence for it offered here, asserts that the Rapture must be an imminent, “any moment” occurrence. Therefore, if the timing of the Rapture were to be attached to a specific known event, such as the Abomination of Desolation, it would remove the mystery of the “any moment” aspect of the Rapture. Further, the expectation of Christ’s return, frequently referred to in the New Testament, is seen as proof of an “any moment” aspect of the pretrib view.

Examples

Let’s take a closer look at the Scripture references that Ron Rhodes offers as evidence for the “imminent/any-moment” doctrine.

1. Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed (1 Corinthians 1:7).

At first glance, this Scripture seems to support Rhodes’ claim. The Corinthians are said to be eagerly waiting for Jesus to be revealed. This is as good a time as any to offer in rebuttal of the doctrine of imminence that one can be eager while waiting for something to be revealed even when one knows exactly when it is going to happen. Something does not have to be a surprise or to take one by surprise to inspire anticipation. Remember, at issue is the idea that if the Church knew exactly when the Rapture was going to take place its “any moment” expectation would evaporate, which only matters if one defines the concept of “any moment” as “surprise” and if one demands that the Rapture come upon the Church as such.

It can easily be demonstrated that the “any moment” aspect of an event can be retained, accompanied by extreme expectation, even when one knows the specific time an event is to take place. Consider a bride and a groom. A bride knows exactly when her wedding is going to take place (down to the minute), but she waits in eager expectation. A groom knows that at any moment his bride is going to come through the doors of the sanctuary, but he waits in eager anticipation for her to be revealed. Neither of them are surprised by the event.

Clearly, this verse does lend to the idea of expectation and anticipation, but let’s take the verse in context by reading the verse that follows:
Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 1:8, emphasis mine).

It would seem that this particular verse is referring to the Church’s expectation of the day of the Lord and the Second Coming, not the Rapture, or at least not a pretrib Rapture.

The next verse offered as evidence by Rhodes is 1 Corinthians 16:22:

2. If anyone does not love the Lord—a curse be on him. Come, O Lord!

This is an interesting verse for it is the only verse that contains the phrase marana tha, which means “Our Lord, Come!” or “Our Lord has come!” Its use here in the Corinthians passage is consistent with its use in various extra-canonical texts in which it invokes the idea of the Lord coming in divine judgment upon the wicked, either immediately or in “the last advent.”

So, again, this verse points to the Second Coming, not the Rapture.

Another verse that is most frequently sited comes from Matthew 24:36:

3. “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father (Matthew 24:36).”

The next verse says: “As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man”—another passage with the Second Coming in view, not the Rapture.

An interesting observation can be made here. The claim of those who teach a doctrine of imminence is that if it were known that the Rapture were to take place at the midway point of the Tribulation period it would destroy the imminent, “any moment” nature of the Rapture. Here, however, Rhodes uses a Scripture that clearly pertains to the Second Coming and not the Rapture to support the idea of imminence. But imminence, if it lives in this verse at all, does so in the context of the Second Coming: an event that we know will immediately follow the distress brought about by the Abomination of Desolation. So, Jesus holds in tension the fact that it was known that the Second Coming would ensue immediately after the distress caused by the Abomination of Desolation, and the reality that the exact day and hour were not known. So, they were told to “keep watch” (v. 42). While modern pre-tribbers feel that a three and a half year notice of the Rapture would destroy imminence, it is obvious that, even though it was known that generally in the days that followed the Abomination of Desolation, not knowing the hour or day created a sense of imminence. So Rhodes finds imminence in a verse that does not apply to the

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Rapture, but in doing so, demonstrates that imminence can exist even when one knows the general timing of an event.

The next verse suggested by Rhodes is Philippians 3:20 (I have also included verse 21):

4. 20 But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

Here we see a verse that does reflect an anticipation of the Rapture since it evokes the transformation of our bodies into glorious ones (a reflection of 1 Corinthians 15:51-54). However, there is no suggestion here of a surprise event, only that we are eagerly waiting for the Savior. In fact, because of the mention of the last trumpet in the Corinthians passage, those who believe in a post-tribulation Rapture will want to weigh in on this verse as well.

In Philippians 4:5, Paul says,

5. "Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near."

This can mean that the Lord is near to His people in a spatial sense or that the time of His coming is near. However, this passage does not even suggest anticipation, much less surprise. On the contrary, it seems to be an encouragement to live circumspectly in light of the Presence of the Lord and His return in judgment.

Let’s look at 1 Thessalonians 1:10 in context:

6. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord’s message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

Here we see that Paul is commending the Thessalonians for their faith in God that has become known “everywhere.” The Thessalonians had “turned to God from idols to serve the living God” and were now waiting “for his Son from heaven . . . who rescues us from the coming wrath.” While there is no suggestion of eagerness or anticipation or of any sense of an “any moment” surprise return of the Lord, it does add to our understanding of the importance of how we define

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2 Ibid., Volume 2, 76-78.
tribulation, the time of great distress, and Daniel’s 70th Week discussed above. If one sees the entire seven years of Daniel’s 70th Week as a time of God’s wrath, then this verse stands in support of the pretrib Rapture scenario. But if, as many non-pretrib believers believe, God’s wrath begins to be poured at once the Abomination of Desolation takes place, then the Rapture can wait until after the time of great distress (past the three and a half years mark into Daniel’s 70th Week) to take place and still fulfill the Church’s expectation of being delivered from the wrath of God.

Rhodes includes Titus 2:13, a verse that for pretrib believers is charged with other meaning which we will address below. However, as a verse marshaled in support of imminence, it misses the mark.

7. While we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ,

The question one has to ask of this verse as it pertains to imminence is why does the appearing of Jesus Christ have to be an “any moment” appearing in order for the Rapture to be a blessed hope? We will discuss this further below.

Rhodes offers Hebrews 9:28 as evidence of an “any moment,” imminent Rapture. He prefers the ESV, so let’s read it in that version:

8. So Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

I assume that it is the phrase “eagerly waiting” that puts this verse into the imminent, “any moment” category. Of course eagerness does not in any way require the thing waited for to be a surprise. Perhaps Rhodes is also focusing on the phrase “not to deal with sin,” in an effort to avoid placing this verse in the Second Coming category. But where it says “not to deal with sin” it simply means “not appearing to die on the cross again in order to provide salvation” but rather to rescue those who are saved. For that reason I have no problem seeing this as a reference to the Rapture, but there is, again, nothing in it to support an imminent, “any moment,” pretrib Rapture.

Rhodes next example is James 5:7-9:

9. Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord’s coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near. Don’t grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!
This verse, more than any of the others, does suggest imminence. But imminence is not lost with any of the Rapture timing scenarios. Anything that one expects to happen soon can be placed in the category of imminent. But this verse does not speak of a surprise (i.e., James’ awareness of the judge at the door), nor does it, in the final analysis, speak of the Rapture. The Rapture is not a judgment event. But even if one decides that the Lord’s return in the Rapture will usher the Church before the Judgment Seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10), we still see nothing here suggesting a surprise element.

It would seem that, for the pretrib advocate, the concept of eagerly waiting or any kind of focused waiting on the Rapture must be interpreted as support for imminence and the “any moment” surprise Rapture.

Lastly, Rhodes says the following:

Imminence makes sense only in pre-tribulationism. In mid-tribulationism, the rapture takes place three and a half years after the tribulation begins. In post-tribulationism, the rapture follows the tribulation. Imminence is impossible in these systems.

Herman A. Hoyt agrees,

When these theologians locate the rapture of the church in the middle of the seventieth week of Daniel, which is measured by years, months, and days, it is no longer true that believers may expect the coming of Christ for the church at any time. A certain period of time must pass and certain prophesied events must take place before Christ can come for the church.3

Let’s think this through. What is the hardened fact that the pretrib believer is trying to assert with the idea of imminence? It is surely that if the Rapture were to happen at the midway point of Daniel’s 70th Week or even at the end of it, the Church would be aware of it and would then be able to pin-point its timing and, therefore, would, in essence, know when it was going to happen. But imminence does not mean that something must catch me by surprise. In fact, if I know that something is imminent, I am not caught by surprise because I am expecting it. (One could say that my awareness of something that is imminent keeps it from being a surprise.) Further, an event can be near or at hand regardless of whether one knows it and expects it or not. Pretrib believers feel that if the antichrist steps out and “confirm[s] a covenant with many for one ‘seven (Daniel 9:27),’” it will mean that the Church, if it is still on the earth, will now know that the Rapture is going to take place, at the very least, within the next seven years, which for some reason means it can no longer be seen as imminent. But this is because, for the pretrib believer,

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imminence equates to surprise. But imminent does not mean surprise, it means

1. Of an event, etc. (almost always of evil or danger): Impending threateningly, hanging over one's head; ready to befall or overtake one; close at hand in its incidence; coming on shortly.\(^4\)

Interestingly, the meaning of the word does include some sense of an at-hand readiness. But if one has a sense of imminence, surprise is not part of it. In fact, the closer one gets to the arrival of a particular moment pregnant with purpose, the sense of imminency increases. So, contrary to the pretrib argument, imminency does not disappear with a mid-trib, pre-wrath, or post-trib scenario, but rather, increases.

Forensic verses Experiential

The pretrib argument from “the blessed hope” asserts that if the Rapture were to take place half-way through Daniel’s 70th Week (in and around the Abomination of Desolation), this would not be much of a “Blessed Hope”—a reference to Titus 2:13:

While we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Pretrib logic says it won’t be much of a blessed hope if God allows us to suffer the wrath of the Great Tribulation. Here again, the decision to paint all of Daniel’s 70th Week as “great tribulation” means that, for the pretrib advocate, the blessed hope means to be rescued from the pain of that so-called tribulation period. Essentially, it will not be a blessed hope unless we miss Daniel’s 70th week entirely. But the question remains, When does God’s wrath begin to be poured out?

As we have already indicated, the pretrib scenario sees the entire span of Daniel’s 70th Week as tribulation and a time of God’s wrath. However, when one looks at the whole of prophecy in the Old and New Testament, one discovers that synonymous with the outpouring of God’s wrath in the end times is the event referred to as the day of the Lord. (For a discussion the day of the Lord, refer to Chapter 2 above. Also refer to APPENDIX 3 where many Scriptures referring to the day of the Lord are listed.)

In the final analysis, the “blessed hope” argument is an argument from consequences. Since a mid-trib Rapture would remove “blessed hope,” then, according to the pretrib position, it must be that the mid-trib rapture position is false.

As a side-note, LaHaye is interesting on this point. In his book, *Rapture [Under Attack]*, he makes the claim that the phrase “blessed hope” is a reference to the Rapture while the phrase “Glorious Appearing” is a reference to the remnant at the end of Daniel’s 70th Week, which he calls the Tribulation.\(^5\) However, the verse cannot be read that way grammatically.

13 looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, (New King James)

13 while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ (NIV)

13 looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus (NASB)

13 waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ (ESV)

The verse clearly indicates that Christians are waiting for the blessed hope AND glorious appearing of Jesus. No distinction is made between the two phrases.

Finally, LaHaye asks the following question:

Can a man honestly get excited about His coming if he knows that he can no longer support his family or buy food for them because he refused the mark of the Beast? A believing father during that period will watch his children starve to death.

LaHaye convolutes things quite a bit with this question.

*First of all*, it makes no sense to expect the mark of the beast and that whole scenario before the midway point of Daniel’s 70th Week.

*Second*, unless you are post-trib, you are not expecting this father to endure these hard times in their fullness, perhaps not at all.

However, if a young believing father found himself alive on the earth with his children just after the Abomination of Desolation takes place, you better know that the promise of an impending Rapture would bring blessed hope to his heart!

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3. The Blessed Hope

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6 Lahaye, Rapture [Under Attack], 68-69.
Desolation takes place, you better know that the promise of an impending Rapture would bring blessed hope to his heart!