

The Rapture - Part 9

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INTRODUCTION

My previous articles commenced a series on the rapture of the church. We began with the question, "What is the Rapture?" This question can best be answered by noting ten truths about the rapture from 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and 1 Corinthians 15:50-58. In previous articles from 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, we saw that the rapture is an important doctrine and not something that can be marginalized or explained away as a secondary doctrine. We also noted that the rapture is an event that is distinct from the Second Advent of Christ. We further observed that the rapture will involve the catching up of every believer to meet the Lord in the air, and that the rapture will involve a reunion between living and deceased Church-Age believers. We then began to examine several more points from 1 Corinthians 15:50-58. We noted that the rapture will be a resurrection, will exempt an entire generation of believers from death, will be an instantaneous event, and is a mystery. We now move on to our ninth point.

An Imminent Event

Ninth, the rapture is imminent. First Corinthians 15:51 says, "Listen, I tell you a mystery: *We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed...*" (italics added). First Thessalonians 4:15 similarly says, "For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that *we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep*" (italics added). In both of these passages, note Paul's use of the pronoun "we." As Paul was unfolding the concept of the rapture to both the Corinthians and the Thessalonians, he anticipated that this event could have taken place in his own lifetime. In other words, Paul maintained that the rapture could happen at any moment. No prophetic sign had to first transpire before the rapture could occur. Another way of saying this is that the rapture is a sign-less event. The term that theologians typically employ in order to describe this reality is "imminency."

In fact, the New Testament routinely depicts the coming of Christ for His church through the rapture as the very next event on the prophetic horizon. This event has the potential of taking place within the next split second. Note the imminency language found in the following New Testament texts. James 5:8 says, "You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near." First Thessalonians 1:10 teaches, "and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, *that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come.*" First Corinthians 1:7 similarly notes, "so that you are not lacking in any gift, awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ." According to Philippians 3:20, "For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ." All of these verses indicate that at any moment Christ could break back into history

to rescue His church from God's coming wrath. Consequently, the church is to live in eager expectation of the any-moment return of the Lord.

Interestingly, the New Testament never exhorts the church to eagerly await any other prophetic sign such as the Antichrist's treaty with Israel or the rebuilding of the tribulation temple. We are not to be looking for the Antichrist. Rather, we are to be looking for Jesus Christ! While it is true that both the Old and New Testament alike do describe key eschatological events such as the coming Antichrist, the peace treaty between the Antichrist and Israel, and the tribulation temple (Dan. 9:27; 1 Thess. 5:3; 2 Thess. 2:1-12; Rev. 13), we are never exhorted to make these things our focus or immediate expectation. On the contrary, the New Testament is clear that we should be focused upon and eagerly awaiting the soon-return of our Savior.

While there are a plethora of signs that first must transpire before Christ can return at the end of the seven-year tribulation period, there are no signs that must occur before the rapture of the church can take place. Yet, the emergence of various signs in our world that are obviously setting the stage for the coming tribulation period alert us to the reality that the rapture cannot be far away. The following holiday analogy is often used to explain this interplay. When we observe people putting up Christmas trees and hanging Christmas lights, department stores putting up replicas of Santa Claus, and radio stations playing Christmas music, we know that the Christmas holiday is fast approaching. These are all signs setting the stage for the celebration of Christmas. However, if these signs begin to occur early enough in November, then we also know that Thanksgiving is approaching even faster since Thanksgiving precedes Christmas on the calendar. Similarly, there are significant signs in our world setting the stage for the coming tribulation period. Such signs include the regathering of the Jews into the land of Israel in unbelief, the trend amongst our political leaders toward a one-world government, the advent of microchip technology, etc... While these signs alert us to the soon approaching tribulation period, they also indirectly inform us that the rapture is coming even faster since (as will be defended in subsequent articles) the rapture must precede the tribulation period. In other words, just as the signs of Christmas alert us to the rapidly approaching Thanksgiving holiday, the signs of the coming Tribulation similarly alert us to the rapidly approaching rapture.

We often hear the misguided proposition that those who are the most heavenly minded are the least earthly good. In actuality, the opposite is true. The doctrine of imminency provides a natural stimulus for holy living in daily life. If we are honest with ourselves, our work habit changes when our boss tells us that he will be back in two weeks versus him telling us that he could poke his head into our office at any moment to ascertain our progress. In the same way, we naturally live differently upon understanding that Christ could return for us at any moment. When I was younger, I lived at my parents house. They would often go away for the weekend and put me in charge of the house. Because they usually told me that they would be back Sunday night, I frequently let the house fall apart on Friday and Saturday. On Sunday morning, however, I started putting the house in proper order. Why? I

did not want my parents to return and find things in a neglected condition. Why did I wait until Sunday? I knew that because they would not be back on Friday or Saturday, I could "slack off" during that time. If they had instead told me that they could return anytime between Friday and Sunday, I would have kept the house in the best possible shape all weekend long.

Similarly, when we study imminency and recognize that Jesus could return at any moment to either give or not give us rewards, based upon how we spent our lives in Christ (2 Cor. 5:10), we are given a tremendous incentive to live right because we do not want Him to return and find us in an embarrassing spiritual condition (1 John 2:28). Thus, 1 John 3:2-3 indicates that everyone who has the hope of Christ's any moment coming purifies himself. Similarly, many of the New Testament scriptural exhortations for daily living are linked to the doctrine of Christ's imminent appearing. For example, James 5:8 says, "You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near." Notice that the any-moment return of the Lord is what gives us an incentive to be patient and stand firm. There are several other practical exhortations for daily living connected to Christ's imminent return found throughout the Bible, such as an encouragement to faithfulness in church leadership (2 Tim. 4:1-2), gentleness (Philip. 4:5) and self-control (1 Pet. 1:13). Sadly, many Christians fail to see how the study of the any-moment return of Christ could positively impact their daily lives. In short, if the doctrine of imminency is ignored, a strong stimulus for holy living is removed.

Not only does the doctrine of imminency create a desire to live holy lives, but it also provides a powerful incentive for evangelistic activity and fervor. If we come to the realization that Christ could return at any moment for His own and then the world will experience seven horrific years of divine judgment, then we will have a strong desire to reach out to the unsaved with the gospel. Why? We would not want unsaved family members, friends, neighbors, and co-workers to be left behind and thus experience that horrific time period. Instead, we would long to see them escape by coming to faith in Christ. Thus, understanding imminency can provide a powerful motivator for evangelism.

Church historians tell us that the two greatest evangelism periods in the history of the church were the church's first two centuries and from the nineteenth century onward. What do both time periods have in common? During both eras, the church adhered to a literal interpretation of prophecy. Once church leaders moved away from a literal interpretation of prophecy in the third century, the fires of evangelism quickly died out. As prophecy was allegorized, symbolized, and spiritualized away during this period, the potent effect of the any-moment return of Christ on the believer and evangelism was diminished. The spark of evangelism was not reignited until a literal interpretation of Scripture was recovered during the Reformation and later applied to the whole subject of biblical eschatology.¹ Injuring the study of prophecy in general and the doctrine of imminency in particular simultaneously injures the cause of evangelism. Because of the impetus that the doctrine of imminency has on the

¹ Grant Jeffrey, *Apocalypse: The Coming Judgment of the Nations* (Toronto, Ontario: Frontier, 1992), 19-20.; Tim LaHaye, *Understanding Bible Prophecy for Yourself* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2001), 18-19.

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believer's daily holiness as well his evangelistic intensity, Satan has worked overtime throughout church history to obscure and remove this doctrine from church teaching and the believer's thinking.

In sum, not only is the rapture an important doctrine, an event that is distinct from the Second Advent of Christ, an event that will involve the catching up of every believer to meet the Lord in the air, a reunion of living and deceased Church-Age believers, a resurrection, an event that exempts an entire generation of Church-Age believers from death, an instantaneous event, and a mystery, but the rapture is also an imminent event that can take place at any moment.

(To Be Continued...)



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