

Biblical Evidence for the Imminence of the Rapture

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What I intend to do here is to examine to what degree the Bible teaches that the Rapture of the church is imminent. First, a definition of *imminence* as applied to the Rapture is in order.¹ In 1973, Robert Gundry wrote that “by common consent imminence means that so far as we know no predicted event will *necessarily* precede the coming of Christ.”² John Sproule 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.”³ I have no reason to quarrel with either definition.

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 indeed occur at any time. Others attempt to deny that the Bible teaches imminence in any sense. Most would prefer to redefine imminence along the lines adopted by Douglas Moo, who objects that the term does not necessarily mean “any moment,” but rather only that the return of Christ “*could* take place within any limited period of time.”⁴

In this paper I will follow the more strict definition, and will view any Biblical passage which teaches or strongly implies that Christ's return for the church can occur at any time without any predicted intervening signs or events as evidence for the imminence of the Rapture.

Criteria for Imminence

But how is one to know for certain whether a specific passage teaches the imminence of the Rapture, when no Rapture passage is given a specific temporal designation? I would propose four criteria, any of which would indicate imminence:

- (1) The passage speaks of Christ's return as at any moment.
- (2) It speaks of Christ's return as near, without giving any signs preceding his coming.
- (3) It speaks of Christ's return as something that gives believers hope and encouragement, without indicating that these believers will suffer tribulation.
- (4) It speaks of Christ's return as giving hope without relating it to God's judgment of mankind.

Based on these criteria, many Second Coming passages fail the test. Matthew 24-25, for example, describes Christ's return as delivering the elect from tribulation and death, and does not prove imminence. Likewise 2 Thessalonians 2 and Revelation 19 fail to speak of imminence, since both depict eschatological chronologies which include signs for Christ's return (although 2 Thessalonians 2:1, a reference to the Rapture, could arguably be separated from the rest of the chapter). Even Revelation 3:10 might fail to meet these criteria, since it speaks of a keeping "out of the time of testing," which, it is argued by many, indicates a deliverance from tribulation that is already occurring. I will proceed instead to passages that are commonly put forth as clearly teaching imminence.

John 14:1-3

¹ "Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. ² "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. ³ "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. (NASU)⁵

John 14:3 is the only passage in the Gospels that is commonly accepted by contemporary pretribulationists and posttribulationists alike as a reference to the Rapture. I

take it as evident that when Jesus says, “If I go,” he is not merely speaking figuratively of his death or resurrection. He refers to a literal departure, in which he went bodily from earth to heaven (cf. Acts 1:11). His next statement, “I am coming again” (*pavlin e[rcomai* – a futuristic present = “I will come again”),⁶ must likewise refer to a literal and bodily return from heaven, not a coming of Christ to individual believers in death⁷ or in the person of the Holy Spirit. Again, many posttribulationists agree with pretribulationists on this point.⁸

When Christ returns, he will take believers to be with him forever. Verse 2 clearly refers to heaven as “my Father's house.” The close connection between the “dwelling places” and the Father's house almost certainly locates the “dwelling places” in heaven.⁹ In verses 2 and 3, Jesus twice discusses an activity which he will carry out in his “Father's house”—he will “prepare a place” for believers.¹⁰ Sometime after that has been accomplished, he will then “come again” and “receive” (*paralhvmyomai* – “I will take to myself”) them “to himself.” Where will he take them? He will take them “where I am” (*o{pou eijmiV eijgwV*). But where exactly is that?

There are two clues to the answer to this question. First, Jesus' double reference to “preparing a place for them” in heaven is irrelevant (even worthless) information if he does not intend to take them there when he “takes” them to himself. The foregoing context thus virtually compels us to conclude that he intends to take them to heaven—where he “will be” (*eijmiV* is also futuristic here). Second, Jesus' next statement is “and where [*o{pou*] I am going, you know the way.” Unless Jesus is being intentionally devious, we must assume that he is still speaking of heaven. In fact, following Thomas' question about the way (v. 5), Jesus candidly states 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 This would allow the Rapture to occur at the same time as Christ's coming to the earth, so that “where he is” is on the earth during the Millennium, not in heaven. As shown above, this explanation makes a mess of the preceding context, as well as the conversation that follows it.

Now, what does all this have to do with the question of the imminence of the Rapture? In the preceding context, the apostles have begun to show signs of fear as a 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 will 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, “Do not let your heart be troubled.” Christ here clearly speaks of the Rapture as an antidote to their fears and as a great hope and encouragement in light of his coming departure to heaven.¹² There is no mention of suffering or judgment from which the Rapture may rescue them, nor are any preceding signs mentioned. It appears to be presented purely as a reunion of the apostles with their Lord, which issues in an eternal “at-home-ness” with both Jesus and his Father.

In addition, assuming a premillennial eschatology, this passage cannot refer to Christ's Second Coming to the earth, since at that time Christ will rule on earth rather 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.

1 Thessalonians 1:9-10

⁹ 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, ¹⁰ 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.

Three time periods are described here, in all of which the Thessalonian believers participated. 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 would appear out of heaven and rescue them “from the wrath which is to come” (***ejk th" ojrhg" th" ejrcomevnh***).

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, which is the wrath of the eschatological 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 says that they will be rescued “from,” “out of,” or “away from” the coming wrath. The UBS⁴ text, following three Alexandrian manuscripts, reads ***ejk th" ojrhg"***. Daniel Wallace, however, argues that the internal evidence strongly supports as original the reading ***apov th" ojrhg"***,¹⁵ which

implies that Christ will not only rescue believers “out of” the coming wrath, but will also keep them “away from” that wrath. To quote Wallace,

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

Even apart from the strength of the **ajpov** reading, the statement points to a deliverance *before* wrath begins. The attempt by many non-pretribulational 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 **ejk** or **ajpov** is used with regard to the believer's deliverance from the coming eschatological wrath (the Tribulation, as depicted in chapter 5), the present passage must be seen to provide strong evidence for Paul's belief in an imminent Rapture.

To object that the participle which names Jesus as the one who rescues (**toVn rJuovmenon**) us, since it is a present tense, must denote a current, progressive deliverance from God's general (non-eschatological) wrath misunderstands both the relevance of the tense of the articular participle and the meaning of the final participle (**th" ejrcomevnh"**, “coming”). The participle **rJuovmenon** may be considered timeless with the force of a substantive.¹⁸ As F. F. Bruce puts it, “the participle plays the part of a nomen agentis, 'our deliverer'“ (as in Romans 11:26, **oj rJuovmeno"** is usually translated “the Deliverer”).¹⁹

On the other hand, the present participle here could be futuristic, making it equivalent to the phrase *ajpov th" mellouvsh" ojrgth"* (“the coming wrath”) in the preaching of John the Baptist (Matt. 3:7; Luke 3:7). The closing participle, *th" ejrcomevnh"*, seems clearly to be futuristic. This would allow a close connection between the future deliverance and the fact that the 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 to which we now turn.

1 Thessalonians 5:4-9

⁴ But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief; ⁵ for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; ⁶ so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober. ⁷ For those who sleep do their sleeping at night, and those who get drunk get drunk at night. ⁸ 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. ⁹ For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ ...

Paul begins this section by assuring his readers that they know “the times and the epochs” (5:1) and do not need any new information on the subject from him. They know “very well” (accurately), for example, that “the day of the Lord will come 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 the “destruction” described in verse 3 is that of the Great 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 upon them. It is unthinkable that people could be saying 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 anything resembling "peace and safety."²¹ Men's hearts will "faint from fear" during the Tribulation (Luke 21:25-27), and there is no reason to think that those who "will not escape" will find Christ's judgment any more comforting.

Beginning in verse 4, Paul contrasts the situation of the believer with that of the unbeliever, inserting the pronouns "you" and "we" (5:4-5). As Paul 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 has no need to discuss the "times and epochs" of the Rapture (5:1).

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 the night, but alertness and soberness are needed in the daytime (cf. 1 Pet. 5:8).²³ Then in verse 9 Paul reaffirms the fact that God has not destined believers to suffer this eschatological wrath, but rather 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 verse 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 literal period of time which stretches through the millennium to the new heavens and the new earth (2 Pet. 3:7-13). It is this period of time that will begin in the night, like a thief. Both night and day are periods of time. The church, Paul says, is not of the night, but of the day (verses 4, 5, 8). Day and night cannot exist at the same time in the same way or 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 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 upon the church that is of the day in the same way and at the same time that it will come upon unbelievers as in the night would seem to contradict the Paul's specific declaration that it will come “as a thief in the night” and to make his counsel to stay alert, watchful, and sober practically worthless.²⁵

It seems evident that Paul presents salvation here as an alternative to the wrath which is manifested by the Tribulation. The purpose of this salvation is that believers will “live with Christ” (*suVn aujtw'/ zhvswmen*, 5:10), which therefore has exactly the same results as the Rapture in chapter 4 (*suVn kurivw/ ejsovmeqa*, 4:17). Even the words of encouragement and comfort (“therefore encourage one another--*parakalei'te ajllhv lou*”--and build up one another,” 5:11) are identical with those in 4:18 (“therefore comfort one another--*parakalei'te ajllhv lou*”--with these words”). Paul clearly teaches that a Rapture will occur and that it will include all living believers (1 Thess. 4:17; 1 Cor. 15:51). The fact that in 1 Thessalonians 5 Paul describes the Rapture as part of the outworking of the salvation which 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 martyrdom. Nothing further can be done to someone to injure him than to take his life. Martyrdom is therefore the supreme result of the wrath of God's enemies which during the Tribulation will be part of God's wrath upon the earth. 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 of the church is not delivered, since they will be martyred. This seems contrary to the clear teaching of 1 Thessalonians 1:10 and 5:9, where no exceptions to the rescue are indicated or implied. The promise of deliverance by Rapture is for the entire church. It is also worth noting that believers who find themselves in the Tribulation and who are kept faithful until death will thereby be “delivered” from denial or apostasy, but this is not the wrath spoken of here. A faithful Christian may be delivered during the Tribulation from his own weakness, but not from the “wrath.” Paul's promise is that the church will be actually and literally delivered from the coming wrath.

I conclude, then, that Paul's exhortation to the Thessalonians to “watch and be sober” (5:6) is unrealistic and his promise that the church is not appointed to wrath (5:9) is misleading if the Rapture is not imminent.

1 Corinthians 1:7

⁷ so that you are not lacking in any gift, awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ

In Romans 8:23, as Paul attempts to show that the Christian's coming glorification is something that far outweighs the suffering he will experience in this life, he declares that believers “groan” within themselves as they “eagerly await” the “redemption of their bodies.”

Two verses later, he explains that they “eagerly await” this hope with perseverance. This verb, *ajpekdevcomai* (“await eagerly or expectantly,” “look forward eagerly”²⁶), found also here in 1 Corinthians 1:7, is always used of Christian hope in the New Testament,²⁷ and Paul uses it only in eschatological contexts.²⁸

Why do the Corinthians need to be reminded, in the midst of a thanksgiving focusing on their wealth of spiritual gifts, that they are eagerly looking forward to the revelation or “unveiling” (*ajpokavluyi*) of Christ? Gordon Fee suggests that they had an “overrealized eschatological understanding of their existence,” connected to their experience of tongues.²⁹ Paul, however, is probably foreshadowing his later warning that the day is coming when the very spiritual gifts on which the Corinthians have centered their Christian existence will cease and be put aside when (or by the time that) “the perfect comes” (13:10). As Paul will say there,

⁸ Love never fails; but if [there are gifts of] prophecy, they will be done away; if [there are] tongues, they will cease; if [there is] knowledge, it will be done away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part; ¹⁰ but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away. ¹¹ When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. ¹² For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known. ¹³ But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians 13:8-13)

The “perfect” (*toV tevleion*) presumably has 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 Paul intends in 1:7 to refocus their expectation on Christ, rather than on themselves and their (temporary) gifts (cf. also 1:17-18, 30-31; 2:2). This indicates that 1:7 has in view an

imminent Rapture, “eagerly expected” at any moment, on which believers should focus their expectation.

The word ***ajpokavluyi***” at times refers to either the Rapture (1 Pet. 1:7, 13; 4:13) or the second coming (2 Thess. 1:7; Rom. 8:19).³¹ Here, where no signs are mentioned, an imminent Rapture is not only possible but most likely. The underlying concept of “seeing” an unveiled Christ as he really is coincides well with such clear Rapture passages as 1 John 3:2, where it is said that the church “will see him even as he is.”

Titus 2:13

¹³ *looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus.*

At the outset in Titus 2:13 it is appropriate to ask why Paul describes Christ's return as “the blessed hope” (***thVn makarivan ejlpivda***). Given that the term ***makavrio***” has a basic meaning of “happy,”³² and that the article ***thvn*** is most likely fulfilling either a *par excellence* (“in a class by itself”) 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 ***ejpifavneia*** (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 and thus refer to the Rapture.

Others have related this event to Christ's posttribulation second coming because it states that Christ's appearing will be a “glorious appearing,” which can only be the

manifestation of an exalted and glorious Christ to the entire world (cf. Matt. 16:27; 19:28; 24:30; 25:31). It must be noted, however, that although 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; 8:18, 30; 1 Cor. 15:43; Phil. 3:21; Col. 1:27; 3:4; 1 Pet. 5:1; 1 John 3:2; Jude 1:24). This “glory” may be either an attributive genitive (“glorious appearing”) or a subjective genitive (the glory “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 exhorts believers to look for the Rapture 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. The argument by some that the context of this passage makes any reference to signs inappropriate is weak,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 *par excellence* of the church loses its significance if it may not arrive “at any moment.”³⁶

1 John 3:2-3

² *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.* ³ *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 (cf. 3:4-11), John reminds his readers that when Jesus appears (*fanerwqh' /*), they will become just like him. This is the Christian's hope, and everyone who has this hope in Christ and his return will purify himself now (in progressive sanctification) so that he may grow into the purity of Christ (cf. Rom. 8:29).

If one expects important guests to arrive at one's home momentarily, one may be busily engaged in cleaning the house and making every possible preparation for their arrival—perhaps with great eagerness which results in a strong focus on “purifying” the house and making it ready. If the guests call to cancel the visit, however, the preparations cease and the motivation for improvement is lost. 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 the exhortation for Christians to purify themselves in light of Christ's return is most significant if his coming is imminent. As John 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

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 establishes a sequence of events: (1) he will appear, (2) we will see him just as he is, and (3) we will be like him. Taken together, these three points are a description of the essential elements of the Rapture. The phrase ***ejaVn fanerwqh'*** (“when/if he appears”) is exactly the same as that used to describe Christ's coming for believers in 2:28, and alludes to Jesus' coming to glorify the church. At the moment of Christ's appearing, all genuine believers will become or be revealed to be “like him”—to be entirely conformed 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. There are practical implications here and now because

of the imminence of that future vision. The hope for the future is an incentive to purity of living in the present. This purity is shown to involve the rejection of sin in the verses that follow. 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, as this passage presents it.

Revelation 22:7, 12, 20

⁷ *"And behold, I am coming quickly. Blessed is he who heeds the words of the prophecy of this book."* ¹² *"Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward [is] with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done."* ²⁰ *He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming quickly." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.*

Three times in Revelation 22, Christ promises that he is coming quickly (***ijdouV e[rcomai tacuv***).⁴⁰ The word ***tacuv*** is an adjective meaning “quick” or “swift.” The form ***tacuv***, a neuter singular, is used as an adverb, with two major types of meanings: (1) “quickly, without delay,” and (2) “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 we take Christ's promises literally, it appears that he was off the mark when he said he was coming back “quickly,” or else he had an unusual view of the meaning of the word. Commentators differ widely in how they attempt to 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 relate to the Rapture as imminent and ready to occur “at any moment.” The word ***tacuv*** 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." G. K. 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 which promise the Rapture of the church all either 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 Paul 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

NOTES

¹ A large number of twentieth-century works on the Rapture use the term "imminency" instead of "imminence." However, most recent works use "imminence" and dictionaries seem to prefer "imminence," so this paper uses the latter term.

² Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), p. 29. More recently, Wayne Grudem has defined "imminent" to mean that "Christ *could* come and *might* come at any time" (*Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994], p. 1096, n. 7).

³ John A. Sproule, *In Defense of Pretribulationism* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1980), p.

12. John Walvoord has also called Gundry's definition untenable for pretribulationists (*The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976], p. 71).

⁴ Douglas J. Moo, "The Case for the Posttribulation Rapture Position," in *Three Views on the Rapture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), p.208.

⁵ The updated New American Standard version will normally be used throughout this paper.

⁶ 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).

⁷ The idea that Christ "comes" to believers at the time of their deaths is actually not found in Scripture at all.

⁸ Moo, "Case," p. 178.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 247, n. 9.

¹⁰ 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) (*IVP Bible Background Commentary—New Testament* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993], p. 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" or *insulae*) to their homes so that they could join together in an ever increasing expanded family.

¹¹ Douglas J. Moo, "Response" to Paul Feinberg, in *Three Views on the Rapture*, p. 100.

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

¹³ Cf. John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), p. 76.

¹⁴ Cf. William K. Harrison, "The Time of the Rapture as Indicated in Certain Scriptures—Part I," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 114/456 (October 1957): 319.

¹⁵ Daniel B. Wallace, "A Textual Problem in 1 Thessalonians 1:10: **Ek th**" ***Orgh**" vs. ***ApoV th**" ***Orgh**," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147/588 (October 1990): 478.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 478.

¹⁷ Leon Morris, *The Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), p. 42; cf. D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles* (Chicago: Moody, 1971), p. 75.

¹⁸ Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles*, p. 72.

¹⁹ F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982), pp. 19-20.

²⁰ Wallace, "Textual Problem," p. 479.

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

²² Paul D. Feinberg, "The Case for the Pretribulation Rapture Position," in *Three Views on the Rapture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), pp. 53-54.

²³ Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, pp. 111-112.

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*, p. 117).

²⁵ The concepts suggested here are elaborated in greater detail by Harrison, "The Time of the Rapture," pp. 320-321.

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 BAGD, 2nd ed., s.v. "**ajpekdevcomai**," p. 83.

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

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 646.

³¹ As Sproule notes, the term **ajpokavluyin** is not a technical term that refers only to the Second Coming (*In Defense of Pre-Tribulationism*, p. 18).

³² BAGD, 2nd ed., s.v. "**makavrio**," p. 486.

³³ See Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), pp. 222-224, for descriptions and other examples.

³⁴ Cf. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, p. 157.

³⁵ Cf. Gundry, *The Church*, pp. 36-37.

³⁶ As Earl Radmacher says, "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* 4.3 [July 1998]: 20).

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, p. 81. 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* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), pp. 119-120).

³⁹ Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1984), p. 147.

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

⁴¹ BAGD, 2nd ed., s.v. "**tacuv**," p. 807.

⁴² Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, NICNT, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 404.

⁴³ Robert W. Wall, *Revelation*, NIBC (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), p. 263.

⁴⁴ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 1135.

⁴⁵ Feinberg, "Case," in *Three Views on the Rapture*, p. 80.