

What Is Imminency? The Doctrine of Imminency

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The Doctrine of Imminency by Todd Strandberg

In doing some research on the doctrine of imminency, I noticed few people take the time to actually define what prophetic imminency means. First, let us look at the general definition of the key word “imminent:” “The quality or condition of being about to occur.”

Imminency, as it relates to Bible prophecy, simply means that the return of Jesus Christ for the Church can happen at any moment. No warning signs will indicate a short-term countdown. We as Christians remain on alert 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

If a wife knows her husband normally gets home from work shortly after 4:00 PM, she knows that beginning at 4:00 PM, his arrival is imminent. If the woman knows her husband has to work overtime, the imminency of his 4:00 PM return is then in doubt.

The only way for the rapture to be truly imminent is to have it transpire before the tribulation. If the Church were required to wait until after the manifestation of certain events, then there would be no doctrine of imminency.

The Granddaddy Of Proofs

The pretribulation rapture is the only view that allows for the rapture to be imminent in its timing. All the other views require a number of prophetic occurrences to take place before the rapture can be declared imminent. To be looking for the imminent return of Christ, you have to believe in a pre-trib rapture.

Jesus repeatedly said that His return for the Church would be a surprise. The Lord even went beyond that by saying He would return “as a thief” when believers generally won’t be expecting Him to come for them.

“But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only” ([Matthew 24:36](#)). “Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come. But know this, that if the goodman of the house had known in what watch the thief would come, he would have watched, and would not have suffered his house to be broken up. Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh. Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his lord hath made ruler over his household, to give them meat in due season? Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing” ([Matthew 24:42-46 KJV](#)).

“Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh” ([Matthew 25:13](#)).

“And he said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power”([Acts 1:7](#)).

Because we have no way to refute the fact that we will not know the timing of our Lord’s return, the tribulation is a barrier to the rapture. No wonder the late John Walvoord called imminency “the heart of Pretribulationism.”

This type of “any-moment” language doesn’t fit a post-trib rapture. If Jesus were prevented from coming until after the battle of Magog, the rise of Antichrist, and the Mark of the Beast, we would have no need to watch for Him before the tribulation.

If the Church were required to go through the seven-year tribulation, you would expect the New Testament writers to have warned us to be prepared for trying times. On the contrary, the New Testament writers repeatedly tell the Church to be comforted by the “coming of the Lord” ([1 Thes 4:18](#)). The word “comfort” alone strongly implies the rapture will take place before the tribulation.

Some anti-imminency folks try to solve the problem they have with the rapture’s any-moment occurrence by redefining it as merely indicating that Christ will return soon. The speed of Christ’s advent is not the issue. If an event is required to take place before the Lord can return, there is no need to remain watchful.

If a person should make it through the tribulation until the point when the mid-trib, pre-wrath, and post-trib folks expect the rapture to occur, it would then become possible for the rapture to be classified as “imminent.” However, once you solve the problem of imminency, you create another one regarding the restrictions against knowing the timing of the rapture.

Because the duration of the tribulation is already known, post-tribbers have the hardest time dealing with the rapture’s timing. Some of them have tried to suggest that believers who make it through the tribulation will lazily lose track of the nearness of Christ’s second coming.

If a Christian has been lucky enough to survive a host of apocalyptic calamities and elude the Antichrist’s secret police for at least 3 1/2 years, I cannot imagine that he would be oblivious to the nearness of the Lord’s return at the 7-year mark. If I were reduced to the point of having to hide in a forest and forage through dead tree bark to find beetles and grubs to sustain myself, I’m certain my every thought would be focused on the Lord’s return.

Maranatha

One the strongest cases one can make for the early Church expecting an imminent return of Christ is to note their use of the word *maranatha*, which was used as a greeting in those days. When believers gathered or parted, they didn’t say “hello” or “goodbye”; they

would say “*Maranatha!*”

I’ve encountered some writings that say *Maranatha* is Hebrew and Greek, but it is actually an Aramaic expression. In fact, it is made up of three Aramaic words: *Mar*, which means “Lord”; *ana*, which means “our”; and *tha*, which means “come.”

So when you put it together, *maranatha* means “Our Lord, come.” It perfectly conveys the concept that the Lord could come at any moment. *Maranatha* is used once in the Bible by Paul as part of a curse. In [1 Corinthians 16:22](#), Paul said, “If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema.*Maranatha*.” The word “*anathema*” means “banned,” so Paul was saying, “Let him be banned from our Lord’s coming.”

The interesting thing about *maranatha* is that it comes in the form of a petition. When a Christian in the early Church would make this statement, he was actually petitioning the Lord to come. This obviously implies the belief that it was possible for Jesus to answer the appeal.

If members of the first-century Church believed that certain events needed to take place before the Savior could return, they would have been silly to greet each other with “*maranatha*.” They lived nearly 2,000 years ago, and yet they seem to have had a deeper awareness of imminency than many of today’s Christians.

The Historical Record

Many of the contemporary writers who attack imminency try to promote the idea that this doctrine was recently dreamed up by men who were ignorant of the true meaning of Scripture.

One detractor states, “This frenzy [imminency] continues to survive today because of modern misconceptions about the purpose of these prophetic events and the time frame for their occurrence.”

Post-trib believers are the most vocal in their claim that the concepts of imminency and the pre-trib rapture only date back to the early 1800s. For several years, their charges went unanswered, but recently a number of men have dusted off old manuscripts and found several early Church fathers who were clearly looking for an imminent return of the Lord Jesus.

“All the saints and elect of God are gathered together before the tribulation, which is to come, and are taken to the Lord, in order that they may not see at any time the confusion which overwhelms the world because of our sins” (Pseudo-Ephraem (374-627 AD).*The First Epistle of Clement*, 23 (written around 96 A.D. by Clement, a prominent leader of the church at Rome who knew some of the apostles personally and probably is the Clement referred to in [Phil. 4:3](#)): “Of a truth, soon and suddenly shall His will be accomplished, as the Scripture also bears witness, saying, ‘speedily will He come, and will not tarry.’”

As early as 70 – 180 AD, *The Didache*, chapter 16, section 1, says, “Be vigilant

over your life; let your lamps not be extinguished, or your loins ungirded, but be prepared, for you know not the hour in which our Lord will come.”

“But what a spectacle is that fast-approaching advent of our Lord, now owned by all, now highly exalted, now a triumphant One!” (Tertullian 155 – 245 AD).

John Calvin, the reformer at Geneva during the 1500s and founder of the Presbyterian Church, made the following statements in some of his commentaries on books of the Bible: “Be prepared to expect Him every day, or rather every moment.” “As He has promised that He will return to us, we ought to hold ourselves prepared, at every moment to receive Him.” “Today we must be alert to grasp the imminent return of Christ.” Commenting on [1 Thessalonians 4](#), the “Rapture passage,” Calvin said that Paul “means by this to arouse the Thessalonians to wait for it, nay more, to hold all believers in suspense, that they may not promise themselves some particular time . . . that believers might be prepared at all times.”

The Westminster Confession, written by the Puritans of England during the 1600s, declared that men should “shake off all carnal security and be always watchful, because they know not at what hour the Lord will come.”

“I say, somewhat more because the dead saints will be raised, and the living changed at Christ’s ‘appearing in the air’ ([1 Thess 4:17](#)); and this will be about three years and a half before the millennium, as we shall see hereafter: but will he and they abide in the air all that time? No: they will ascend to paradise, or to some one of those many ‘mansions in the father’s house’ ([John 14:2](#)), and so disappear during the foresaid period of time.” (Morgan Edwards 1742-44).

I’m not much of a fan of relying on what scholarly men write about the Bible. I agree with the quotes I just cited, but I don’t really need a bunch of dead guys to tell me what is truth. I have over a dozen copies of the Good Book lying around the house, and I have the ability to read and understand each of them for myself.

History has proven that mankind is a dreadful biblical guide. The apostasy that swept over the Church caused a lack of prophecy commentary from about 450 AD until the 1600s. People stopped thinking for themselves. Their interpretation of the Bible became what the institutional church spoon-fed them.

Premillennialism largely disappeared after it was condemned as heretical by the Council of Ephesus in 431 AD. It wasn’t until the reform movement of the early seventeenth century that we see a rebound in the number of statements that reflect the pretribulational view.

Scripture Galore

A host of Scriptures indicate the Church should expect an imminent return of their Lord. The opponents of imminency constantly try to pick apart each individual reference, but they should look at the big picture. An overwhelming number of verses in the Bible

support imminency.

I've been able to easily locate 22 passages that imply that the coming of Christ remains an imminent event. All you really need is one verse to prove a point, but the weight of evidence should cause even the most hard-core imminency foes to rethink their stance.

I seriously doubt any scholar or layman could find 22 passages of Scripture that clearly indicate the tribulation or the rule of the Antichrist is the next imminent event facing the Church.

“But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only” ([Mat 24:36](#)). Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom. And five of them were wise, and five were foolish. They that were foolish took their lamps, and took no oil with them: But the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept. And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him” ([Mat 25:1-6](#))

“Take ye heed, watch and pray; for ye know not when the time is. For the Son of Man is as a man taking a far journey, who left his house, and gave authority to his servants, and to every man his work, and commanded the porter to watch. Watch ye therefore: for ye know not when the Master of the house cometh, at even, or at midnight, or at the cockcrowing, or in the morning: Lest coming suddenly He find you sleeping. And what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch”([Mark 13:33-37](#)).

“Knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light” ([Rom 13:11-12](#)).

“And the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly” ([Rom 16:20](#)).

“So that ye come behind in no gift; waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” ([1 Cor 1:7](#)).

“For our conversation is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ” ([Phil 3:20](#)).

“Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand” ([Phil 4:5](#)).

“And to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come” ([1 Thess 1:10](#)).

“Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober” ([1](#)

[Thess 5:6](#)).

“That thou keep this commandment without spot, unrebukeable, until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ”([1 Tim 6:14](#)).

“Looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus” ([Titus 2:13](#)).

“So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation” ([Heb 9:28](#)).

“Let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the Day approaching” ([Heb 10:24-25](#)).

“For yet a little while, and He that shall come will come, and will not tarry” ([Heb 10:37](#)).

“Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain. Be ye also patient; stablish your hearts: for the coming of the Lord draweth nigh. Grudge not one against another, brethren, lest ye be condemned: behold, the judge standeth before the door” ([James 5:7-9](#)).

“Wherefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” ([1 Peter 1:13](#)).

“But the end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer” ([1 Peter 4:7](#)).

“Keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life” ([Jude 1:21](#)).

“Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown” ([Rev 3:11](#)).

“Behold, I come quickly: blessed is he that keepeth the sayings of the prophecy of this book” ([Rev 22:7](#)).

“He which testifieth these things saith, Surely I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus” ([Rev 22:20](#)).