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The Rapture and the Biblical Teaching of Imminency

BY ROBERT L. THOMAS

Be dressed in readiness, and keep your lamps lit. Be like men who are waiting for their master when he returns from the wedding feast, so that they may immediately open the door to him when he comes and knocks.

LUKE 12:35

Imminence is a crucial teaching of Jesus and the apostles related to end-time prophecy. The English word *imminence* means an event that can occur at any time. An imminent danger is a threat that is close at hand and can happen at any moment. There can be no detectable signs that such a danger is about to take place.

When interpreting prophecy, however, some scholars use the word “imminent” less precisely to mean an event that may occur soon, but may also be preceded by specific signs or warnings. Contrary to this, pretribulationists understand the Bible to teach that some prophetic events, such as the rapture and the day of the Lord, will occur at a future time without any preceding signs or events. Therefore, if pretribulationism is the correct New Testament teaching, it must be demonstrated biblically that the rapture will occur without warning and without signs that necessarily indicate its nearness.

The testimony of the ancient fathers, the earliest leaders of the church after the apostles, could perhaps help answer this question. The church fathers definitely speak of future imminent events. But surprisingly, their testimony is mixed, sometimes speaking of the imminence of Christ's return and other times of the imminence of the future time of God's wrath. For example, Clement speaks of the return of Christ as imminent:

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;" and, "The Lord shall suddenly come to His temple, even the Holy One, for whom ye look."¹

Ignatius speaks of the coming of God's wrath on the earth as imminent:

The last times are come upon us. Let us therefore be of a reverent spirit, and fear the long-suffering of God, that it tend not to our condemnation. For let us either stand in awe of the wrath to come, or show regard for the grace which is at present displayed—one of two things.²

But Irenaeus speaks of both as imminent:

And therefore, when in the end the Church shall be suddenly caught up from this, it is said, "There shall be tribulation such as has not been since the beginning, neither shall be."³

Why this apparent ambivalence among early Christian leaders who were following the same teachings of the New Testament that we follow today? I propose that there is good reason for their teachings that both are imminent. The return of Christ for His church and the return of Christ to inflict wrath and tribulation on the world is close at hand and can happen at any moment.

Years ago, I investigated the book of Revelation to substantiate this dual imminence, i.e., that both the coming of Christ and the coming of God's wrath on the world are imminent.⁴ This chapter will focus its attention on Paul's two epistles to the Thessalonian church, but it first must probe the question of how the New Testament teaching on imminence originated. The concept of the imminence of these two future happenings interweaves itself into New Testament teaching from beginning to end, raising the strong probability that the origin of the teaching was none other than Jesus Himself. Thus the first area to explore briefly will be some of Jesus' teachings on the subject.

JESUS' EMPHASIS ON IMMINENCE

The Olivet Discourse

In Luke 12:35–48, as part of His later Judean ministry, Jesus instructed His disciples about the need to be ready for His return:

“Be dressed in readiness, and keep your lamps lit. Be like men who are waiting for their master when he returns from the wedding feast, so that they may immediately open *the door* to him when he comes and knocks. . . .

“But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have allowed his house to be broken into. “You too, be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour that you do not expect. . . .”

And the Lord said, “Who then is the faithful and sensible steward, whom his master will put in charge of his servants, to give them their rations at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes. Truly I say to you that he will put him in charge of all his possessions. But if that slave says in his heart, ‘My master will be a long time in coming,’ and begins to beat the slaves, *both* men and women, and to eat and drink and get drunk; the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect *him* and at an hour he does not know, and will cut him in pieces, and assign him a place with the unbelievers.”

These two parables contain two pictorial expressions that became a vital part of Christian vocabulary throughout the history of the first-century church.⁵ The first is that of the master standing at the door and knocking, and the second is that of the unexpected coming of a thief. Both figures are designed to teach the imminence of Christ’s return. In each parable the unexpected coming brings blessing to the followers who are prepared, but in the latter parable that coming brings punishment to those who are unprepared.

On Tuesday of His last week on earth, Jesus taught similar lessons regarding the imminence of His return. In Matthew’s and Mark’s Gospels when giving the parable of the fig tree immediately after speaking of His return in glory to the earth, He derives this application from the parable: “When you see all these things, recognize that He is . . . at the door” (Matt. 24:33). The signs given in Matthew 24:4–28 are within Daniel’s Seventieth Week (Dan. 9:24–27) and indicate the nearness of Jesus’ return to earth as described in Matthew 24:29–31.⁶ These signals of nearness cause this parable to differ from the parable in Luke

12:35–48, which contains no signs of nearness. Neither are there signs available in Luke 17:26–37 where Jesus, with several similar comparisons, predicts the imminent coming of the kingdom of God.

But in Matthew 24:36 Jesus turns the page to speak of the absence of all signs as signals of the beginning of Daniel’s Seventieth Week.⁷ His words are, “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.” Here He indicates the complete unexpectedness of what will overtake the world.⁸ He changes attention from the signs that indicate the nearness of His coming to establish the kingdom to speak of events that will have no signals to indicate that they are “at the door.”⁹ In other words, 24:36 speaks of something different from “all these things” twice referred to in connection with the parable of the fig tree in 24:32–34. After 24:36 Jesus turns to look at the Seventieth-Week events as a whole (the entire future tribulation of seven years) and how the beginning of that week will catch everyone by surprise.¹⁰

Jesus proceeded to illustrate the complete unexpectedness of the series of events of that week by noting the parallel of His coming to inflict wrath on the world with the way God caught the world by surprise with the flood in Noah’s day (24:37–39). The victims did not know until the flood happened. That will be the case when the Son of Man returns. The world will not know until the tribulation period is under way. They will have no warnings such as those alluded to in the parable of the fig tree.

Jesus continued His emphasis on the imminence of His return by describing two workers in the field and two grinders at the mill (24:40–41). In each case, one will be taken in judgment as were those outside of Noah’s family, and the other will be left as were the members of Noah’s family. The picture presented is that of complete surprise. Outside Noah’s immediate family, no one had the faintest idea that a series of cataclysmic events was about to occur. On that basis, Jesus commanded the disciples to watch, because neither they nor anyone else knew or knows on what day their Lord would come (24:42).

At that point Jesus gave the men five parables to enforce His teaching of imminence. The first is in the gospel of Mark and the last four in the gospel of Matthew. The Markan parable tells of a man who left home for a journey and gave his slaves tasks to accomplish while he was gone. He gave special instructions to the doorkeeper to remain on the alert because they had no idea when the master of the house would return (Mark 13:33–37). This parable contains nothing to indicate the master would return within a given timespan, so the slaves were

to remain on the alert into the indefinite future.

Matthew's first parable, the second in this series by the Lord, tells of the master of a house who did not know during what watch of the night the thief would come (Matt. 24:43–44). Though not stated explicitly, it is implicit that the master did not know on what given night the thief would come, if he would come at all. As a result, the thief broke into his house because the master was not watching. In light of that comparison, the Lord tells His disciples to be prepared because the Son of Man will come at an hour they do not expect. This marks the Lord's second use of the figure of the unexpected coming of a thief. The parable fixes no limited time frame during which the thief had to come.

Matthew's second parable in this series describes the slave who is faithful and wise and the slave who is wicked (24:45–51). Their master will richly reward the slave whom he finds fulfilling his responsibilities when he returns, but will punish severely that wicked slave who uses the delay in his master's return to abuse the authority given to him. "The master of that slave will come on a day when he [the slave] does not expect him and at an hour which he did not know" (24:50). That slave can expect weeping and gnashing of teeth. The parable fixes no maximum time limit for the master's absence.

The fourth parable in the series, the third in Matthew's gospel, speaks of ten virgins, five of whom were foolish and five wise (25:1–13). When the bridegroom came unexpectedly in the middle of the night, the foolish virgins had no oil for their lamps. By the time they purchased oil, it was too late, and they found themselves locked out of the wedding feast where the wise virgins had been admitted. Neither group knew a fixed period within which the groom would return, but one group was ready, the other was not. The lesson: "Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour" (25:13).

The fifth and last parable in the series comes in Matthew 25:14–30, the parable of the talents. Prior to leaving on a journey, the master gave one slave five talents, another two talents, and a third slave one talent. The one with five talents gained five more, and the one with two gained two more. Upon the master's return, they received his commendation with a promise of being given more responsibility. The slave with one talent buried his talent and received the master's rebuke for not investing it to gain more. That slave's destiny was outer darkness. The lesson of this parable is that of serving the Lord responsibly while awaiting His return. Readiness for His return also entails responsible action while He is away.

To synthesize Jesus' teachings: in the flood and sowers-grinders illustrations and in the first four parables, the incontrovertible lesson Jesus teaches is that of the imminence of His return to judge, and therefore, the need for watchfulness and readiness for that return whenever it should occur. It is no wonder that the early church and the church throughout the ages has looked for the imminent return of her Lord. He will return with no prior signals to herald His return. Since nothing remains to occur before His coming, that coming is imminent.

The Upper Room Discourse

On the Mount of Olives, the dominant theme of this Tuesday of Jesus' final week was Christ's return to judge, as He spoke to the disciples as representatives of the nation Israel. On Thursday of that week, He spoke to them in an entirely different role in His discourse in the upper room. This time He addressed them as representatives of a new body to be formed about fifty days later, that body being the church. He injected His imminent return in a more subtle fashion, but He nevertheless made His point. In John 14:3 He said, "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." Imminence is part of the verb form "I will come," the Greek word being *erchomai*. Used in parallel with the future indicative *paralēpsomai*, which means "I will receive," the present tense *erchomai* is clearly a futuristic use of the present tense, a use of that tense that strongly implies imminence. The sense is, "I am on my way and may arrive at any moment."

This is a coming for deliverance for the faithful, however, not a coming for judgment. He will retrieve the faithful and take them back to the Father's house with Himself (John 14:2-3). There they will remain with Him until He returns to the earth to establish His earthly kingdom for a thousand years.

We conclude, therefore, that Jesus was the one who initiated the teaching of the imminence of His return both to judge the world and to deliver the faithful. As we proceed, we will see how that teaching caught on with the first-century church. Subsequent books of the New Testament indicate that two figures used by Him to portray that imminence caught the attention and remained in the memories of early Christians. One was the surprise arrival of a thief and the other was the picture of a master standing at the door ready to enter at any moment.

EMPHASIS ON IMMINENCE BY NEW TESTAMENT WRITERS OTHER THAN PAUL

In the late forties of the first century AD, James wrote in his epistle to Jewish believers in the Diaspora (i.e., the dispersion of the Jews) about dual imminence. This dual imminence involved the imminence of judgment on the oppressors of the poor (James 5:1–6) and the imminence of Christ’s coming as an incentive for the long-suffering of the faithful (vv. 7–11). James has Christ standing at the door, ready to enter and rectify past injustices (v. 9). That was one of the figures introduced by Jesus in His Olivet Discourse. In the late sixties Peter wrote to believers in what is now north central Asia Minor about the imminent arrival of the day of the Lord (2 Pet. 3:10). Using a later part of that day to represent the whole period, he spoke of the day’s coming as a thief, both to encourage mockers to repent and to help the faithful to persevere. That was the second figure used by Jesus on the Mount of Olives. In the last decade of the first century, John wrote to seven churches in first-century Asia to persuade the unrepentant to repent and the faithful to hold fast (Rev. 2–3).¹¹ One of those churches he exhorted to watchfulness as a thief would in light of Christ’s coming (Rev. 3:3).

But our task in the present essay is to examine the writings of a fourth New Testament writer, Paul, and to see how he taught the dual imminence of Christ’s return and the day of the Lord, especially in his Thessalonian epistles.

PAUL’S EMPHASIS ON IMMINENCE IN 1 THESSALONIANS

The Day of the Lord in 1 Thessalonians 5

Paul very clearly teaches the imminence of the wrathful phase of the day of the Lord in 1 Thessalonians 5:2–3: “For you yourselves [i.e., the Thessalonian readers] know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. While they are saying, ‘Peace and safety!’ then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape.” The apostle offers further evidence of the widespread impact of Jesus’ use of the thief figure to express imminence. He reflects the negative impact of the day of the Lord in speaking of the destruction that will beset earth’s inhabitants when it arrives. By comparing the period to the birth pains of a pregnant woman, Paul shows his awareness that the Old Testament and Jesus

Himself used that comparison to depict the time just before Jesus' personal re-appearance on earth (Isa. 13:8; 26:17–19; 66:7ff.; Jer. 30:7–8; Mic. 4:9–10; Matt. 24:8).

Later in the paragraph, in discussing the exemption of believers from the horrors of this period, Paul gives indication that the day is a period of wrath: “For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 5:9). This first phase of the day of the Lord (i.e., the tribulation of seven years) will witness the outpouring of God’s wrath against a rebellious world.

Regarding 1 Thessalonians 5:2, Hiebert writes, “As a prophetic period, the Day of the Lord is inaugurated with the rapture of the church as described in 4:13–18, covers the time of the Great Tribulation, and involves His return to earth and the establishment of His messianic reign. In this passage Paul is dealing only with the judgment aspect of that day.”¹² Regarding the figure of the coming thief, Hiebert continues, “The comparison lies in the suddenness and unexpectedness of both events. The thief comes suddenly and at a time that cannot be predetermined; so the Day of the Lord will come suddenly when people are not expecting it.”¹³ That is the imminence that Jesus described when He taught His disciples that no one knows the day or the hour when God will begin to vent His wrath against the world. The apostle reminds his readers that they know with exactness that nothing specific regarding the date for the beginning of the day of the Lord can be known. No prior signals will occur to alert people to the proximity of the day, which forces them to respond as though it could begin at any moment.

The Catching Away in 1 Thessalonians 4

The imminence of the day of the Lord in 1 Thessalonians 5 is obvious, but what is the nature of expectation related to the coming of the Lord to catch away His saints in 1 Thessalonians 4? I have expressed elsewhere that the *peri de* (“now concerning” or “now as to”) that begins chapter 5 turns to a new subject, but not one completely distinct from the one previously under discussion at the end of chapter 4.¹⁴ The connective phrase marks a shift in thought, but a shift that is not without some connection with chapter 4. Both the previous and the following context of 1 Thessalonians 5:1 relate to the *parousia* (“coming”) of Christ. The original readers had an accurate awareness of the unexpectedness

of the arrival of the day of the Lord (5:1–2), having received prior instruction from the apostle. But they were ignorant of and therefore perplexed about what would happen to the dead in Christ at the time of Christ’s return. Before beginning his review of the imminence of the day of the Lord in 5:1–11, Paul had clarified for them that the dead in Christ will have an equal and even a prior part in the events surrounding Christ’s return (4:13–18).

Is that coming for those in Christ described in 1 Thessalonians 4 an imminent coming? The answer to that question is yes and is based on several indicators. One is the writer’s use of the first person plural in 4:15, 17: “*we* who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord . . . *we* who are alive and remain” (italics added). Paul was personally looking forward to the Lord’s return. This was not a “pious pretense perpetrated for the good of the church. He sincerely lived and labored in anticipation of the day, but he did not know when it would come.”¹⁵ He was setting an example of expectancy for the church of all ages.¹⁶

Proper Christian anticipation includes the imminent return of Christ. His coming will be sudden and unexpected, an any-moment possibility. This means that no divinely revealed prophecies remain to be fulfilled before that event. Without setting a deadline, Paul hoped that it would transpire in his own lifetime. Entertaining the possibility of his own death (2 Tim 4:6–8) and not desiring to contravene Christ’s teaching about delay (Matt 24:48; 25:5; Luke 19:11–27), Paul, along with all primitive Christianity, reckoned on the prospect of remaining alive till Christ returned (Rom 13:11; 1 Cor 7:26, 29; 10:11; 15:51–52; 16:22; Phil 4:5). A personal hope of this type characterized him throughout his days (2 Cor 5:1–4; Phil 3:20–21; 1 Tim 6:14; 2 Tim 4:8; Tit 2:11–13).¹⁷

Another indicator of the imminence of Christ’s coming for those in Christ lies in the nature of Paul’s description in 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17 and its parallel in 1 Corinthians 15. In 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17, Paul taught the Thessalonian believers that the dead in Christ will be the main participants in the first act of the Lord’s return since they are resurrected before anything else happens. Then living Christians will suddenly be snatched away, presumably taking on their resurrection bodies without experiencing death. Paul claimed he learned this truth regarding the sudden snatching away of church saints by “the word of the Lord” (1 Thess. 4:15).

In 1 Corinthians 15:51–53, Paul called similar information a “mystery” giving evidence that the two passages treated a parallel subject. In other words,

Paul spoke of the same event described in 1 Thessalonians 4 about four years later when he wrote to the Corinthians:

Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we all will be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality.

The additional detail that believers will be changed (resurrected) in a blinking of the eye reveals that the whole process of the rapture will be a momentary happening, not an extended process. Before people know what is happening, it will be over. That again speaks of imminence in that Paul again uses the first person plural (“us” and “we”) in 1 Corinthians. He expected to be alive at the parousia.¹⁸ Something that comes and goes that quickly is surely beyond human ability to pinpoint.

How have various prophetic systems with no room for imminence handled this biblical teaching? Notice how Gundry defines imminence: “By common consent imminence means that so far as we know no predicted event will *necessarily* precede the coming of Christ.”¹⁹ His definition would be correct if he had omitted “so far as we know” and “*necessarily*” from that sentence. The statement would then read, “By common consent imminence means that no predicted event will precede the coming of Christ.” His additions render his definition of imminence totally inaccurate.

He continues, “The concept [of imminence] incorporates three essential elements: suddenness, unexpectedness or incalculability, and a possibility of occurrence at any moment. . . . Imminence would only raise the possibility of pretribulationism on a sliding scale with mid- and posttribulationism.” His terms “suddenness,” “unexpectedness,” and “incalculability” are accurate, as is “a possibility of occurrence at any moment.” But raising “the possibility of pretribulationism on a sliding scale with mid- and posttribulationism” is totally inaccurate. If Christ’s pretribulation coming is only one possibility among several possibilities (mid- and posttribulationism), the biblical teaching of imminence has disappeared. If a pretribulation rapture is only a possibility, a person who does not prepare for Christ’s return has a calculated chance of coming through unscathed after Daniel’s Seventieth Week begins. However, Jesus and the other New Testament writers offer no such prospect.

Carson writes regarding imminence, “‘The imminent return of Christ’ then means Christ may return at any time. But the evangelical writers who use the word divide on whether ‘imminent’ in the sense of ‘at any time’ should be pressed to mean ‘at any second’ or something looser such as ‘at any period’ or ‘in any generation.’”²⁰ Carson’s suggestion of a “looser” meaning of imminence removes the primary force of the word. Trying to understand what he and other representatives of this “not imminent but imminent” group mean by imminence or expectation is extremely difficult. It is almost like trying to adjudicate a “doublespeak” contest.

Carson says, “Yet the terms ‘imminent’ and ‘imminency’ retain theological usefulness if they focus attention on the eager expectancy of the Lord’s return characteristic of many NT passages, a return that could take place soon, i.e., within a fairly brief period of time, without specifying that the period must be one second or less.”²¹ Like Gundry, Carson wavers on the meaning of imminent. If imminence means only that Jesus may return at any period or in any generation, it does not match with the New Testament teaching on the subject. Such a looser connotation of the word “imminent” loses contact with what Christ taught and what the rest of the New Testament writers insisted was the proper Christian outlook.

Erickson approaches imminence this way:

It is one thing to say we do not know when an event will occur; it is another thing to say that we know of no times when it will not occur. If on a time scale we have points 1 to 1,000, we may know that Christ will not come at points 46 and 79, but not know at just what point He will come. The instructions about watchfulness do not mean that Christ may come at any time.²²

Erickson’s reasoning is difficult to follow here. Christ never designated points at which He would not return. He could come at point 46 or 79, contrary to Erickson’s assertion. He could come at any point between 1 and 1,000. His failure to come already does not erase the ongoing possibility that He may come at any moment.

Witherington’s wording is different: “In short, one cannot conclude that 1 Thessalonians 4:15 clearly means that Paul thought the Lord would definitely return during his lifetime. Possible imminence had to be conjured with, but certain imminence is not affirmed here.”²³ From a practical standpoint, possible imminence is tantamount to certain imminence. How Witherington can dis-

tinguish between the two defies explanation. *Certain imminence* means Christ could come at any moment; *possible imminence*, unless one offers an alternative of impossible imminence to go with it, also means that Christ could return at any moment. The “impossible-imminence” alternative directly contradicts the possible-imminence teaching and is therefore impossible.

Beker represents an unbiased approach to the text when he clarifies Paul’s attitude more accurately than those who cannot fit imminence into their eschatological systems:

Thus delay of the parousia is not a theological concern for Paul. It is not an embarrassment for him; it does not compel him to shift the center of his attention from apocalyptic imminence to a form of “realized eschatology,” that is, to a conviction of the full presence of the kingdom of God in our present history. It is of the essence of his faith in Christ that adjustments in his expectations can occur without a surrender of these expectations (1 Thess. 4:13–18; 1 Cor. 15:15–51; 2 Cor. 5:1–10; Phil. 2:21–24). Indeed, the hope in God’s imminent rule through Christ remains the constant in his letters from beginning to end. . . .²⁴

The “nonimminence” scholars, who must place Christ’s coming for those “in Christ” at the end of Daniel’s Seventieth Week, must speak of the unexpectedness of His advent within a limited period of time, because all would agree that events of the tribulation period will be recognizable. Once that period has begun, His coming has to occur within a specified number of years. If that is their meaning, Christ’s warnings to watch for His coming are meaningless until that future period arrives. The church need not watch as He commanded. For when that prophetic week arrives, imminence will no longer prevail because His coming will not be totally unexpected. It will have specified events to signal at least approximately, if not exactly, how far away it is.

Saying the New Testament teaching of imminence has become garbled in the systems of prewrath rapturism and posttribulationism is probably not an overstatement. According to different advocates, it may mean at any moment within the last half of the Seventieth Week, at any moment after the Seventieth Week, during any period rather than at any moment, at an unexpected moment with some exceptions, possibly at any moment but not certainly at any moment, or as many other meanings as there are other opponents of a pretribulation rapture.

Other Indications of Imminence in 1 Thessalonians

In 1 Thessalonians 1:9–10 Paul wrote about his readers’ turning to God from idols for two purposes: to serve the living and true God and to await His Son from heaven. The second purpose strikes a note that is continuously sounded in his preaching in the city (Acts 17:7) and throughout both Thessalonian epistles (1 Thess. 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:2, 23; 2 Thess. 2:1, 8). Primitive Christianity believed that the resurrected and ascended Christ would return and that His return was near.²⁵ Paul speaks of Jesus delivering *us* from the coming wrath when He comes from heaven, thereby including himself and his first-century readers among those to be rescued from that future wrath. In this subtle way he again included himself, modeling the proper Christian outlook in expecting a return of Jesus at any moment.

In 1:10 he also speaks of the wrath as “coming” (“who rescues us from the coming wrath,” NIV) and uses the present participle *erchomenēs* to qualify the wrath. Though the kind of action—*aktionsart* or aspect—of articular participles is not necessarily stressed in New Testament Greek, the frequent use of the present tense of this verb in a futuristic sense to speak of the imminence of end events probably portrays the imminence of the wrath that is already on its way and hence quite near.²⁶

Another statement of Paul in 1 Thessalonians that is best explained as imminence is 1 Thessalonians 2:16b: “But wrath has come upon them to the utmost.” These words are the climax of a paragraph in which Paul is uncharacteristically condemning his fellow Jews for their part in the crucifixion of Christ and persecuting the prophets and Paul along with his fellow missionaries. Earlier in verse 16 he speaks of their forbidding the evangelizing of the Gentiles as a part of the divine outcome that they should reach the limit in sinning against God (2:16a).

The wrath for which the Jewish people as well as the rest of the world are destined is the eschatological wrath spoken of already in 1 Thessalonians 1:10, a well-known and expected period—the day of the Lord or Daniel’s Seventieth Week—just before the Messiah inaugurates His kingdom. This pronouncement of the arrival of the wrath brings Paul’s excursus against the Jews to its logical climax.

Surprisingly, however, Paul does not use a future tense “will come” to speak of the wrath. He uses a past tense, “has come.” The Greek expression is *ephthasen epi* (“has come upon”), the same combination used by Jesus in Matthew 12:28 and Luke 11:20 to speak of the arrival of the kingdom. “The kingdom of God

has come upon you” were the Lord’s words to His listeners. The unique force of the verb in that situation connoted “arrival upon the threshold fulfillment and accessible experience, *not* the entrance into that experience.”²⁷

The connotation in 1 Thessalonians 2:15 is the same with regard to the wrath. Just as the kingdom reached the covenant people at Christ’s first advent without their enjoying “the experience ensuing upon the initial contact,”²⁸ so the wrath to precede that kingdom has come without the Jews’ full experience of it. It is at the threshold. All prerequisites for unleashing this future torrent have been met. God has set conditions in readiness through the first coming and the rejection of the Messiah by His people. A time of trouble awaits Israel just as it does the rest of the world, and the breaking forth of this time is portrayed as an “imminent condemnation” by the combination *ephthasen epi*.²⁹ Such a potential presence of the wrath accords with the epistle’s emphasis on an imminent breaking forth of end-time events, one of which is the time of Israel’s trouble just before the Messiah’s return.³⁰

In light of this brief study of 1 Thessalonians 1:10 and 2:16, it is evident that dual imminence prevails elsewhere in 1 Thessalonians rather than just in chapters 4 and 5.

PAUL’S EMPHASIS ON IMMINENCE IN 2 THESSALONIANS

A major objection to Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians has been an eschatological perspective that is allegedly different from what 1 Thessalonians teaches. The theory advanced is that 2 Thessalonians upholds a Christian approach to the doctrine of last things that arose after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.³¹ The principal difference cited is that Paul supposedly mentions various signs in 2 Thessalonians that will take place before the arrival of the day of the Lord. That contrasts with the indication in 1 Thessalonians that the day could come at any moment, without any prophesied event(s) to precede it. This proposed difference in teaching, offered as a challenge of the Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians, allegedly occurs in 2 Thessalonians 2:1–3.

Imminence of Our Gathering Together and the Day of the Lord (2:1–3)

Since Paul’s first epistle to the church at Thessalonica, that church had been beset with false teaching—claims that the day of the Lord had already begun. Believers there must have considered the persecutions and afflictions they were

experiencing (2 Thess. 1:4) to be the initial phase of that day, comparable to the pains of a “woman with child” spoken of in the first epistle (1 Thess. 5:3). They could not have had such an impression if Paul had in his first letter led them to believe that Christ’s return would be a single event—an event that initiated the day of the Lord. Posttribulationists are at a loss to explain how the first-century readers could have thought themselves to be already in the day of the Lord if that day came concurrently with the coming of Christ. Paul had just written of how God would afflict the unrighteous and reward the faithful in the day of the Lord in the first chapter (2 Thess. 1:5–10). The readers knew that the opening period of that day would be a day of persecution for the saints, so the false teaching had led them to believe that they were already in that period.

To correct this error, Paul first refers to “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him” (2:1). “Our gathering together to Him” defines which aspect of Jesus’ coming the writer has in mind. It reminds the readers of the great event described in 1 Thessalonians 4:14–17, the gathering of those in Christ to meet Him in the air en route to be with the Father in heaven. He wanted to emphasize that the day of the Lord cannot begin on earth until the saints are in heaven with the Father. Since Christ’s reappearance to take the saints to heaven had not yet happened, the day of the Lord could not yet have begun. Therefore, the apostle asks them not to be shaken or troubled by the false message they had received (2:2a). The gathering together had not yet occurred; hence the day of the Lord was not yet in progress.

Paul even specifies the nature of the false teaching. It was proposing that “the day of the Lord is present” (2:2b). The rendering of the verb *enestēken* (the perfect tense of *enistēmi*) as “is present” rather than as “has come” or “will come” is very important, because that is the key to interpreting the difficult verse immediately following.

English versions have, for the most part, completely mistranslated the verb *enestēken*. Those with erroneous renderings include the KJV, the RSV, the NASB, the NIV, the ASV, the ESV, and the NKJV. Only three versions consulted render the verb correctly. Darby renders, “the day of the Lord is present,” Weymouth has, “the day of the Lord is now here,” and the NRSV gives, “the day of the Lord is already here.” Any of these captures the intensive force of the perfect tense of *enestēken*. That the perfect tense of *enistēmi* means “is present” cannot be doubted in light of its usage elsewhere in the New Testament (Rom. 8:38; 1 Cor. 3:22; 7:26; Gal. 1:4; Heb. 9:9).³²

With the nature of the false teaching clearly in mind, as a next step Paul urges, “Let no one in any way deceive you” (2:3a). He then furnishes a reason for knowing that the day of the Lord is not present. The difficulty is Paul’s assumption of an unstated main clause to accompany the “unless” clause (i.e., “unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed,” 2:3b). As is customary in language usage, Paul chose not to repeat the verb that constitutes the main clause of the conditional sentence, thus requiring readers to substitute the parallel antecedent verb to fill in the blank.³³ We might say, “I am going to the store, then home.” In the last clause, we need to supply the verb from the first clause, “then *I am going home*.”

The verb to be supplied in 1 Thessalonians 2:3 is, of course, *enestēken* from verse 2. The sense of 2:3b would thus become, “The day of the Lord is not present unless the apostasy comes first and the man of lawlessness is revealed.” Unfortunately, no English version consulted renders the suppressed main clause correctly in this verse. Most give the supplied verb a future sense, such as, “The day of the Lord will not come,” a change that misses Paul’s point. The issue involved in his correction of the false information to which the readers had been exposed is not the future coming of the day of the Lord; it is rather the current non-presence of that day at the time he writes and they read his words. If that day were not present, then they could not be in that day.

For example, suppose I say, “In the northern states, the fall season *will not come* unless first the weather gets colder and the tree leaves change their colors.” This sentence might imply that the weather gets colder and the tree leaves change their colors before the fall season comes. But this isn’t true. These changes do not occur before the fall but are part of the fall season. But if I say, “The fall season *is not present* (is not here) unless first the weather gets colder and the tree leaves change their colors,” this implies something different. The cooler weather happens first, and then the colors of the leaves change. These two factors take place within the fall season and indicate its arrival. They don’t occur before the fall season arrives. These examples demonstrate the need for translating 1 Thessalonians 2:3 correctly.

With two small corrections, 2 Thessalonians 2:1–3 of the NASB can be adequately corrected and serve as a guide for further discussion of the passage’s meaning [corrections in italics]:

Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord *is now present*. Let no one in any way deceive you, for *that day is not present* unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction.

Another vital issue to settle in 2:3b relates to the adverb *prōton* (“first”). In the preferred translation of 2:3b (i.e., “The day of the Lord is not present unless the apostasy comes first and the man of lawlessness is revealed”), two meanings are possible. It can mean that both the coming of the apostasy and the revelation of the man of lawlessness precede the day of the Lord. Or it can mean that the coming of the apostasy precedes only the revelation of the man of lawlessness and not the day of the Lord.³⁴

Typically, prewrath rapturists and posttribulation rapturists opt for the former possibility, i.e., that the apostasy and the revelation of the man of lawlessness precede the day of the Lord. They base this on the mistranslation of an implied *enestēken* in various English versions of 2:3b. Robert Gundry typifies this position and has entitled one of his recent books *First the Antichrist: Why Christ Won't Come before the Antichrist Does*. He writes, “Paul says not only that ‘the Day of the Lord’ won’t arrive unless that evil figure ‘is revealed’ but also that ‘the rebellion’ which he will lead against all divinity except his own (claimed falsely, of course) ‘comes first’ (2 Thess. 2:1–4).”³⁵ Erickson joins Gundry in using this support for his posttribulation stance when he writes, “Paul also stated about A.D. 50 that the day of the Lord could not come (II Thess. 2:2) until the Antichrist and a major apostasy had come (v. 3).”³⁶ That view is oblivious to the lexical and grammatical requirements of the Greek text, however, and a brief survey of syntactical features will show its inadequacy.

A close grammatical parallel to 2 Thessalonians 2:3b occurs in John 7:51, which uses (1) a present tense verb in a main clause; (2) an “unless” clause (Gr., *ean mē*) with a compound subject (two subjects with an “and”); and (3) the word “first” (Gr. *prōton*) in the first subject of the compound “unless” clause.³⁷ John 7:51 reads: “Our Law does not judge a man unless it first hears from him and knows what he is doing, does it?” The judicial process (present indicative of *krinei* [“judge”]) is not carried out without two parts: hearing from the defendant first and gaining a knowledge of what he is doing. Clearly in this instance, hearing from the defendant does not precede the judicial process; it is part of it.

But it does precede a knowledge of what the man does. The word “first” (*prōton*) indicates that the first half of the compound “unless” clause is prior to the last half. In the judicial process 1) judges must first hear what a man has to say, and 2) then they can know what he is doing.

So in 2 Thessalonians 2:3, the day of the Lord is not already underway unless two things happen: first, the apostasy must come, and then the man of lawlessness must be revealed. These are two major elements that take place within the day of the Lord, not before it arrives. If the falling leaves are signs within the fall season, they are not signs that precede the fall season.

Another construction that has the same grammatical pattern is Mark 3:27. “No one can enter the strong man’s house and plunder his property unless he first [Gr. *prōton*] binds the strong man and then [Gr. *tote*] he will plunder his house.” The word “first” in this sentence does not refer to what precedes the “unless” clause, as if it meant that one must first bind a strong man before he can enter his house. Instead, the word “first” shows the priority of what follows: 1) a person enters the strong man’s house; 2) he must *first* bind the strong man; 3) and *then* the strong man’s house is plundered.³⁸ The word “first” applies to what follows, as is evident in the word “then” (*tote*) in the final clause of the verse.

Application of these grammatical parallels to 2 Thessalonians 2:3 results in the following: “The day of the Lord is not present unless first in sequence within that day the apostasy comes, and following the apostasy’s beginning, the revealing of the man of lawlessness occurs.” Rather than the two events preceding the day of the Lord as has often been suggested, these are happenings that comprise conspicuous stages of that day after it has begun. By observing the nonoccurrence of these, the Thessalonian readers could rest assured that the day whose leading events will be so characterized was not yet present.³⁹

Assigning this meaning to 2 Thessalonians 2:3 frees Paul from the accusation of contradicting himself. In 1 Thessalonians 5:2 he wrote that the day of the Lord will come as a thief. If that day has precursors, as 2 Thessalonians 2:3 is often alleged to teach, it could hardly come as a thief. Thieves come without advance notice. Neither does the day of the Lord have any prior signals before it arrives.⁴⁰ Paul does not contradict that meaning in 2 Thessalonians 2:3. He still clings to the imminence of the wrathful phase of the day of the Lord.

Resulting from all these phenomena, the force of 2:3 is, “The day of the Lord is not present unless first, in sequence within it, the apostasy comes and following the apostasy’s beginning comes the revelation of the man of lawlessness.”

CONCLUSION

As is clear from the evidence offered above, a dual imminence exists in the teachings of Jesus, Paul, and other New Testament writers. Two prophetic events yet future will take place without any preceding signs or forewarnings of their occurrence: the rapture of the church and the beginning of the day of the Lord. The day of the Lord cannot begin before the rapture. Since both events are imminent, they must coincide with each other, i.e., occur at basically the same moment. That is why Paul can speak about both events as coming like a thief in the night or related expressions (cf. 1 Thess. 1:10; 4:15, 17).⁴¹ Pretribulationism is the only eschatological system that can explain the fact that in the New Testament both the coming rapture and the coming day of the Lord are imminent events on the prophetic calendar.

NOTES

1. The First Epistle of Clement 23.
2. Ignatius, Ephesians 11, shorter version.
3. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.29.1.
4. Robert L. Thomas, "The 'Comings' of Christ in Revelation 2–3," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 7 (fall 1996):153–81.
5. Marshall notes the recurrence of the picture of the master standing outside the door and knocking in Revelation 3:20, and the recurrence of the metaphor of the thief in 1 Thessalonians 5:2, 4; 2 Peter 3:10; Revelation 3:3; 16:15 in I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 536, 538. With regard to the thief metaphor, see also Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, BECNT, ed. Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1171; and Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, vol. 24, *New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 360.
6. Davies and Allison correctly see "all these things" in verses 33 and 34 as embracing "all the signs and events leading up to the parousia" in W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, 3 vols., ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 366; cf. also 367. Donald A. Hagner agrees that the expression covers "everything spoken of in vv. 4–28," in Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, WBC, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Dallas: Word, 1995), 715).
7. Davies and Allison take 24:36 as the heading for the section on "Eschatological vigilance" (24:36–25:30) rather than linking it with material that has gone before in the Discourse, and see the entire section as teaching that "one must be ever prepared for what may come at any time" (*Matthew*, 374, cf. also 374 n. 1).
8. Hagner correctly understands "that day and hour" to mean that setting a time for the *parousia* is "beyond human determination altogether, and not just partially, e.g., so that, say, the month or year *could be known*" (*Matthew 14–28*, 716). Blomberg agrees (Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, *New American Commentary*, ed. David S. Dockery [Nashville: Broadman, 1992], 365).
9. Davies and Allison illustrate the unity of the section begun at verse 36 by citing the repetition of key phrases (e.g., "you do not know" [24:42], "you do not expect" [24:44], "he does not know" [24:50], "you know neither the day nor the hour" [25:13]) and key words (e.g., "know," "day[s]," "hour," "come[s]," "Son of man," "watch") that are repeated throughout (*ibid.*, 377).

10. Davies and Allison understand “that day” in 24:36 to refer to the Old Testament day of the Lord, spoken of in the NT as the *parousia* and, because of a difference in perspective, explain the timing uncertainty of verse 36 not as contradicting the certainty of verse 34 but as interpreting it (*ibid.*, 378; cf. also Blomberg, *Matthew*, 365). They understand “this generation” of verse 34 to refer to Jesus’ contemporaries rather than seeing it as a qualitative expression, the view I prefer; cf. Robert L. Thomas, “The Place of Imminence in Two Recent Eschatological Systems,” in *Looking into the Future: Evangelical Studies in Eschatology*, ed. David W. Baker (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 201–4. For further delineation of the qualitative view, see Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 491.
11. See Thomas, “The ‘Comings’ of Christ,” 153–81, for a fuller discussion of dual imminence in that portion of John’s writings.
12. D. Edmond Hiebert, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 227.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Robert L. Thomas, “1 Thessalonians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 11 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 280.
15. Hiebert, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 210.
16. J. B. Lightfoot, *Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul* (repr. of 1895 ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), 67.
17. Thomas, “1 Thessalonians,” 11: 278.
18. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT, ed. Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 800.
19. Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 29.
20. D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 490.
21. *Ibid.* Carson’s reference to “one second or less” vividly recalls 1 Corinthians 15:52 where Paul prophesies that Christ’s coming will be “in a moment [or flash], in the twinkling of an eye.”
22. Millard J. Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 181.
23. Ben Witherington III, “Transcending Imminence: The Gordian Knot of Pauline Eschatology,” *Eschatology in the Bible & Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 174.
24. J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul’s Apocalyptic Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 49.
25. Ernest Best, *A Commentary on the First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 83.
26. James Everett Frame, *The Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1912), 89.
27. K. W. Clark, “Realized Eschatology,” *JBL* 59 (September 1949): 379.
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Ibid.*, 380.
30. See Best, *First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 120–21.
31. Willi Marxen, *Introduction to the New Testament*, trans. G. Buswell (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), 42; Reginald H. Fuller, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1966), 57; Normal Perrin, *The New Testament, An Introduction* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 120.
32. F. F. Bruce, “1 & 2 Thessalonians,” *Word Biblical Commentary*, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, vol. 45 (Dallas: Word, 1982), 165; D. Michael Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians, The New American Commentary*, E. Ray Clendenen, vol. 33 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 227–28.
33. Peter Cotterell and Max Turner, *Linguistics & Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1989), 24.

34. Martin (*1, 2 Thessalonians*, 232) notes, “Its [i.e., the adverb *prōton*] placement in the sentence slightly favors the understanding that the apostasy comes ‘first’ and then the lawless one is revealed,” and goes on to say the adverb could possibly indicate the arrival of apostasy and the revelation of the man of lawlessness before the day of the Lord.
35. Robert Gundry, *First the Antichrist* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 20.
36. Erickson, *Basic Guide to Eschatology*, 175.
37. For a more detailed explanation of the Greek grammar involved, see Robert L. Thomas, “2 Thessalonians,” *Ephesians–Philemon*, Expositor’s Bible Commentary, vol. 12, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 467–68.
38. See also Craig A. Blaising, “The Day of the Lord and the Rapture” (part 3 of a four-part series), *Bib-Sac* 169 (July–September 2012): 268–70. Regarding the Mark 3:27 passage, Blaising writes, “In other words, in this example binding the strong man is the first action entailed in entering and plundering the house. For it is likely in this example that the strong man is in the house and thus would first have to be bound” (269).
39. For more details about the context in 2 Thessalonians 2:1–4, such as false reports about the day of the Lord, the time significance of *enestēken*, an implied apodosis of a “present general condition,” the role of the adverb *prōton*, see my discussion of the passage in Thomas, “2 Thessalonians,” *Ephesians–Philemon*, 461–69.
40. To this effect J. Christiaan Beker writes, “Paul emphasizes the unexpected, the suddenness and surprising character of the final theophany (1 Thess 5:2–10),” in Beker, *Paul’s Apocalyptic Gospel*, 48.
41. Thomas, “1 Thessalonians,” 2. “Ephesians–Philemon.” 12:421