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The Imminent Return of Jesus Christ

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Jesus Christ is coming again. The second coming of Christ is a basic doctrine of the Christian faith. However, the timing of Christ's return is a mystery. While Christians wonder when Jesus will come again, God has not revealed this part of His plan for the future, nor has He promised to satisfy our curiosity. However, God has clearly revealed that Jesus could return at any moment. The idea that Jesus' return could occur at any time is called the doctrine of "imminency." Jesus' coming is imminent.

The Meaning of Imminency

Webster defines "imminent" as "hanging over, projecting from above" and "appearing as if about to happen; likely to happen without delay; impending."¹ An imminent event could happen at any time, with no necessary circumstances or activities preventing that event from taking place. When it relates to Jesus' return, imminency means that there are no world conditions that must be met and no prophecies that must be fulfilled before Jesus can come. He could return at any time. "The imminent coming of Jesus Christ means that there are no signs or events that must take place prior to His return."²

Showers rightly distinguishes between that which is "imminent" and that which is "soon":

The term "soon" implies that an event must take place "within a short time (after a particular point of time specified

or implied)." By contrast, an imminent event may take place within a short time, but it does not have to do so in order to be imminent. Thus, "imminent" is not equal to "soon." This is illustrated by the fact that the next coming of Christ was just as imminent when the New Testament was written as it is today.³

The doctrine of Jesus' imminent return is defensible biblically, but to say that Jesus is coming soon can be no more than a personal opinion or an expression of a Christian's heartfelt desire for Christ's return.

Biblical Support for the Imminency of Christ's Coming

The early church held to the doctrine of the imminent return of Jesus Christ, although imminency has not been the universal conviction of the church down through the centuries. "Primitive Christianity believed the event to be imminent and this belief has been revived from time to time in the history of the Church."⁴ So, what is the biblical evidence for the imminency of Jesus' return?

In John 14:3, Jesus promised that He would come back and take His followers to be with Him. This verse hints at the doctrine of imminency. "The original Greek is a present tense with the sense of immediate future. This futuristic idea brings the possibility of Christ's coming right down to the immediate present and makes His coming imminent, that is, possible at any moment."⁵

In 1 Corinthians 1:7, Paul commended the Christians at Corinth for eagerly waiting for the Lord's return. They had a sense that Jesus could return at any moment, and they waited expectantly for His return. Likewise, Paul underscored his own belief in the imminent return of Jesus Christ in 1 Corinthians 16:22 by using the Aramaic word "maranatha," which means "Come, O Lord." "It would appear, then, that the fixed usage of the term 'Maranatha' by the early Christians was a witness to their strong belief in the imminent return of Christ."⁶

Philippians 3:20 also supports the doctrine of imminency. Paul said that we "eagerly await" our Savior from heaven. "Wait is a compound word that speaks not only of anticipating the Lord's arrival but of an intense focus on that event."⁷ Paul's focus was on the imminent return of Jesus Christ, not on events that might lead up to His coming. Later, in Philippians 4:5, Paul challenged his readers

to live joyfully and gently because “the Lord is near.” This phrase emphasizes the imminence of Jesus’ return rather than His spiritual presence among believers.

First Thessalonians 1:10 relates how the new Christians at Thessalonica were waiting for Jesus to come from heaven. “This is the only place where the word translated ‘to wait for’ is used in the New Testament.”⁸ This distinct word for “wait” means to “expect someone or something.”⁹ The early Christians expected Jesus to return at any time, a concept that the apostle Paul commended.

In Titus 2:13, Paul taught that Christians should live godly lives because they “look for” or “wait for” the “blessed hope,” which Paul clarifies to be “the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.” The next eschatological event that we’re to anticipate is the arrival of Jesus Christ. Therefore, His return must be imminent.

James 5:7-9 says that we’re to be patient “until the Lord’s coming” because “the Lord’s coming is near.” To say that the Lord’s coming is near does not imply a timeframe relative to His second coming, but refers to the immediate readiness with which Jesus is prepared to enter this world. “James is declaring that the Lord Jesus ‘has drawn near,’ indicating that He may well appear at any moment.”¹⁰ Furthermore, the verses say that the Lord as Judge “is standing at the door.” “Christ as judge began to stand before the door before James wrote his epistle, and Christ as judge continues to stand before the door. In other words, Christ’s coming was imminent in New Testament times and continues to be imminent.”¹¹

First John 2:28 also supports the doctrine of the imminent return of Jesus Christ. John instructed his readers to “continue” or “abide” in Christ so that they wouldn’t be ashamed “when he appears” at the time of “his coming.” John anticipated the return of Jesus Christ as the next event in God’s timetable.

The book of Revelation frequently refers to Jesus as saying that He is coming “soon” or, better, “quickly” (Revelation 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20). His return will be swift. At the very end of the New Testament, John expressed his expectation in Jesus’ return, writing, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20). The idea conveyed by these words is that Jesus could return at any time, and His coming will be welcomed by His people.

Implications of the Imminency of Christ’s Coming

The doctrine of the imminency of Christ’s return carries a theological and a practical implication. Theologically, imminency points to a pre-tribulation rapture of the church. Many end times prophecies must be fulfilled before Jesus comes physically to the earth, but nothing remains to be fulfilled before Jesus comes in the air to take His church to heaven. “The pretribulational rapture of the church includes the necessary corollary of imminence in the doctrine.”¹²

More significantly, the doctrine of imminency influences Christians at a very practical level. Since Jesus Christ could return at any moment, we should be living in obedient fellowship with Christ at every moment. As Titus 2:12 tells us, in light of Jesus’ imminent return we must “live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age.” After all, Jesus really could come today!

¹ Webster’s New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged. Second Edition. New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1983, “imminent” en. loc.

² Benware, Paul N. Understanding End Times Prophecy. Chicago: Moody Press, 1995, p. 176.

³ Showers, Renald E. Maranatha: Our Lord, Come! Bellmawr, New Jersey: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, 1995, pp. 127-128.

⁴ “Parousia,” The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, Third Edition. Ed. by E. A. Livingstone. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 1223.

⁵ Hoyt, Herman A. The End Times. Chicago: Moody Press, 1969, pp. 96-97.

⁶ Showers, p. 131.

⁷ Benware, p. 177.

⁸ Showers, p. 133.

⁹ Bauer, Walter; Arndt, William F.; Gingrich, F. Wilbur; Danker, Frederick W. A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958, p. 57.

¹⁰ Benware, p. 177.

¹¹ Showers, p. 136.

¹² Hoyt, p. 96.