

The Second Advent of Christ Our Blessed Hope

This advent season our sermons are focused on the “second coming/advent” of Jesus Christ. Last week we saw the contrast between the first and second advents of Jesus. Jesus’ first advent was characterized by humility and obscurity, whereas His second advent will be characterized by power and great glory.

When you read what Paul, Peter, James and John wrote about the second advent of Jesus Christ, you find that they longed for that day. They looked forward to the return of Christ with great anticipation. They lived like they were strangers and aliens here on earth; they knew that their home was in heaven with Jesus Christ. Consequently, they longed for the day Jesus would return and bring them home.

If you’re anything like me, you’re somewhat ambivalent when it comes to the return of Christ. You feel differently in different seasons of life. When nothing is going your way and when you’re stressed out and when you’re sick and tired of trying to make relationships work and when you’re body is weak, you’re ready for Christ to return. The sooner the better . . . (“It would be great if Christ would return before my statistics final on Tuesday . . .”) Sometimes we experience so much heartache in this world that we know it’s not our home. And we long for our home in heaven.

But there are other times when I find so much joy in this life that I’m sad at the thought of it coming to an end. Sometimes I find so much satisfaction in relationships and in ordinary things like food and wood and humor and music. I love many things about this life. I’m convinced intellectually that the joys of heaven will outstrip the joys of this life; but there are things I’d love to do in this life, and there are things I’d love to see God do in this life. I have mixed emotions at the thought of Jesus returning and this life being over. Can you relate to my thinking at all?

As with every thought and attitude, I need to bring this ambivalence about the return of Christ to the Scriptures. I need to let my thinking and feeling be formed by Scripture. When I do that, the Scriptures that speak of Christ’s return force me to think about the topic of “hope.” The Scriptures force me to ask the question, “In what do I place my hope?” Am I pinning my hopes on my circumstances (which can vary wildly in the course of a few hours) or am I pinning my hopes on Jesus Christ (who is the same today, yesterday, and forever)?

Today we are going to examine three key Scriptures that challenge us to set our hope on Jesus Christ at His return.

Fixing our “hope” on Jesus Christ at His Return:

“Looking for the blessed hope. . .” – Titus 2:11-14 I want us to notice how Paul refers to the second advent of Christ in Titus 2. We’ll begin reading in verse 11:

11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, 12 instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly,

righteously and godly in the present age, 13 looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, 14 who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds.

As we'll discuss next week, one emphasis of this passage is that the return of Christ should stimulate a zeal for good deeds. Anticipation of the return of Christ should never lead to complacency or fatalism or escapism. Anticipation of the return of Christ should stimulate a zeal for good deeds. Today I simply want us to notice how Paul speaks of the return of Christ in verse 13:

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

As we live for God in this world, we are to "look for" (await expectantly) two things: "the blessed hope" and "the appearing of the glory." In the Greek text Paul uses one article (i.e. "the") to govern both hope and appearing – indicating that he is using two terms to describe the same thing. In other words, the "blessed hope" and the "appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior" refer to the same event – namely, the second coming of Christ. [Hope and glory are also linked together in Romans 5:2 and Colossians 1:27.]

We look for this "appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus." This is what we discussed last week; Christ will return in power and great glory. We also look for "the blessed hope." The biblical concept of hope is that of **confident expectation**. If you have hope, you are confident and expectant about the future. This is different from being an optimistic, positive person; it's much deeper than that. If you have hope you are confident that God will one day fulfill every promise He has made – even if your circumstances are currently tragic. You expect that one day you will experience your salvation in fullness.

Here Paul refers to the second coming of Jesus Christ as "the **blessed** hope." Paul is emphasizing that we should have confident expectation about the blessing that we'll experience at the second coming of Christ. This is a constant theme in the New Testament. At the second coming of Christ believers will experience a type of blessing that we can barely imagine. At the second coming everything that hinders our relationship with God will be removed: the habits of the flesh which can dominate our lives will be gone; Satan and his minions will be bound and banished; this world and its systems will be transformed. At the second coming of Christ we'll experience our salvation in fullness. We will be transformed instantaneously into the image of Jesus Christ – in spirit and in body (1 Corinthians 15:51-52). 1 John 3:2 John tells us:

2 Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is.

Look around you. You are sitting near people who will one day be "like Jesus" in spirit and body. That's our blessed hope.

We need to anticipate this “blessed hope” because this world is full of struggle and hardship and turmoil. You probably have circumstances in your life right now that cause you heartache, even something that may not be fixed this side of heaven: a relationship that has suffered irreparable damage; a loved one who has died; etc. Our heartaches and our brokenness should make us long for the blessed hope of the return of Christ. Paul wrote this in Romans 8:18:

18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

We look forward to the blessed hope – the return of Jesus Christ. It puts our heartache into perspective.

“Fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you . . .” 1 Peter 1:13

In 1 Peter 1:13 Peter wrote this:

13 Therefore, prepare your minds for action, keep sober in spirit, fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

When Peter writes, “fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ,” he is implicitly acknowledging that it is very possible to fix our hope partially on Jesus Christ and partially on something else. It’s possible to place our confidence in this world and what it has to offer. Peter says that such hope is misplaced. Our hope will only be satisfied when Jesus returns. When He returns He is bringing grace – all the things we talked about a few minutes ago: transformation, freedom, fullness.

But the temptation is for us to cheat a bit. Yes, we’re looking forward to the return of Christ . . . but what really gets us excited is _____. If we’re honest, we’re not only fixing our hope on the grace we’ll receive at the return of Christ. We’re also fixing our hope on . . . more money, more discretionary time, a higher standard of living, a husband/wife, a better husband/wife, retirement, etc. In dozens of subtle ways, we fix our hope on our circumstances in this life. We subtly think that this world will come through for us and deliver the satisfaction we want.

This passage challenges me to put everything I love about this life into its proper context. I don’t think Peter is suggesting that I should be grumpy and joyless in this life. I don’t think he’s saying that I’m more spiritual if I find no satisfaction in this life. I don’t think he’s saying that I shouldn’t expect anything from God until Jesus returns. No, I think it’s more a matter of ultimate hope. It’s a matter of having a deep conviction that “This world is not my home. Any satisfaction I get here is a bonus. But I am placing my confidence in the grace I’ll receive at the return of Christ.”

It’s like C.S. Lewis said, “Aim at heaven and you will get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you get neither.” The idea is that if our primary satisfaction is in Jesus Christ (we’re “aiming at heaven”), we find secondary satisfaction on earth all over the place. If

we're filled up with Jesus Christ and we are confidently anticipating His return, then we're freed up to enjoy relationships and dozens of other good gifts God gives.

By contrast, if my hope is in this life (if I'm "aiming at earth"), there's a lot of pressure on everybody and everything around me. I'm forcing my family and friends to give me significance and security in ways they can't deliver. I'm forcing my possessions and my pursuits to give me happiness in a way that they simply can't. That's a recipe for frustration. Peter's counsel: fix your hope completely on the grace you'll receive at the return of Christ.

"... and so we shall always be with the Lord." 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Beginning in verse 13 Paul addresses an issue about which the Thessalonians were apparently confused. They were confused about what happens to believers who had died before the return of Christ. We don't know whether they thought that those who weren't alive at the return of Christ would miss it altogether or whether they thought that they would be at some disadvantage. Whatever the specific confusion, Paul writes this:

13 But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope.

"Those who are asleep" is a euphemism for "those who have died." This imagery reflects that those who have died are inactive in this world, not that they are unconscious. Some have (wrongly) taught the concept of "soul sleep" – the idea that those who have died are in a state of suspended animation until the resurrection.

To the contrary, Scripture teaches that when the believer dies, s/he goes directly into the presence of Jesus. Jesus told the thief on the cross, "Today you will be *with Me* in paradise." Paul wrote in Philippians 1, "For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain" because dying means "departing and being with Christ" (Philippians 1:21, 23). When the believer dies, s/he dwells in the presence of Christ (in a disembodied state of being – see 2 Corinthians 5). As we'll see, the believer doesn't get a resurrection body until the return of Christ.

Paul tells the Thessalonians that he wants them to be informed about believers who have died "so that you will not grieve as do the rest [i.e., unbelievers] who have no hope." Paul was keenly aware that the Thessalonians lived among people who didn't anticipate anything beyond the grave; they believed that death meant ceasing to exist. When a loved one dies, people without the hope of eternal life grieve very differently than those who do have hope. Remember that "hope" is not a wish, but a confident expectation of something. Verse 14 expresses the content of our hope:

14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ guarantees the resurrection of those who have "fallen asleep in Jesus"; what happened to Jesus happens to His people. Since the Thessalonians believed that Jesus had died and rose again, they could be confident

that those who had “fallen asleep in Jesus” would also be resurrected. Paul expresses this in an interesting way: “God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.” Paul explains what this means in verses 16 and 17.

In verse 15 Paul discusses the resurrection of believers – both those who are alive and those who have died – at the coming of the Lord. Notice that Paul (like many believers in every generation) thought that he would be among those alive when Christ returns.

15 For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.

In case the Thessalonians thought otherwise, Paul assures them that believers who have died are at no disadvantage; as a matter of fact, they have the advantage of being raised first – before those “who are alive” at the coming of the Lord.

16 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

A shout/command reflects Jesus’ authority over heaven and earth. The archangel would be the highest-ranking angel in all of heaven. Trumpets are often associated with the acts of God. Jesus Himself descends in the midst of such great, loud sounds. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Believers who have died will be resurrected first. They instantaneously receive a glorious, incorruptible, immortal body, a body uniquely suited to the presence of God. Believers who have died are resurrected first . . .

17 Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord.

Those who are alive will be “caught up” together with the “dead in Christ” who have just been resurrected. The term “caught up” means “to seize or snatch”; we get the term **rapture** from the Latin translation of this term. This is the primary Scripture that teaches the rapture of the church. The entire Church – all believers who have ever lived – will be together “in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.” Paul is obviously describing something that transcends human experience. He is using imagery that should fill us with wonder and delight. This is the moment when our deepest hopes will be realized.

Paul’s last comment is “and so we shall always be with the Lord.” For Paul, this was the greatest blessing associated with the return of Christ – being with the Lord. Remember that Paul wrote in Philippians 1 that dying was great gain because it meant “departing and being with Christ.” Jesus Christ was the center of his thinking and speaking and acting here on earth; therefore, having unhindered fellowship with Jesus at His coming was Paul’s greatest joy. He set his hope completely on the grace to be brought to him at the coming of the Lord Jesus (1 Peter 1:13) because being “with the Lord” was his greatest delight here on earth.

18 Therefore comfort one another with these words.

We can comfort one another in relation to brothers and sisters in Christ who have died. We can comfort one another with the reality that this world is not all there is. There will be a day when all who believe are caught up together in the clouds to meet the Lord. We shall always be with the Lord.

The challenge here is for us to see the continuity between our love of being with the Lord (or “abiding in Christ” - John 15) here in this life and the hope of “being with the Lord always” when He returns. This is where we need to be honest with ourselves: if we don’t love being with the Lord here and now, it’s hard to get excited about “being with the Lord always” when Christ returns. My simple challenge is for each of us to fall more deeply in love with Jesus here and now. This obviously isn’t the type of thing you can manufacture. Nobody else can make you love being with the Lord.

But if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, this love of being with Jesus has been implanted in your heart. If it has been covered up or neglected, simply ask God rekindle it within you. I believe God loves to answer the prayer, “Heavenly Father, please rekindle within me the desire to enjoy fellowship with Jesus. And as I love His presence here on earth, teach me to fix my hope completely upon the grace Jesus will bring when He returns – especially the grace of His presence.”