

BluePrints: The Return
By Jason Huff
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Zephaniah 1:4-7, 2:1-3; Luke 12:35-48; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

Friends, our final Scripture reading today comes from 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11. I invite you to turn there in your Bibles and to pull out the insert from your bulletin to follow along. Let's listen to the Word of God. "Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words. Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing."

"Time-sensitive." You ever get a letter marked with those words – "time-sensitive"? Usually that's my first sign to throw it in the trash. Special offers on used cars, free TV sets from Art Van Furniture, timeshares in Arizona – "time-sensitive." Act now! We've had the church's phone line all of eight weeks and we get calls saying that we need to "call now" to make sure we have the right natural gas provider. We don't own a building to have utilities! But "act now or miss out" plays on our sense of urgency. Eventually, though, we get cynical. We expect that if somebody wants our time or attention or money, they're going to cry wolf.

For the history of the church, we have been accused of crying wolf about the return of Jesus. The world has no sense of history, and so we have a real problem with a promise that's gone unfulfilled for nearly two millennia. But the return of Jesus is an essential of the Christian faith – and something that your elders and I must believe in order to lead in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. It's that important. Here's the seventh essential in our study:

Jesus Christ will come again to the earth -- personally, visibly, and bodily -- to judge the living and the dead, and to consummate history and the eternal plan of God. "Even so, come, Lord Jesus."

It's the shortest of the essential tenets we've studied, but it also makes some of the most difficult demands on our faith. Let's see why that's the case, and why what we believe about Jesus' coming affects us here and now.

We're going to separate the tenet into two parts – the “what” and the “why” of Jesus' return. First, the “what”: *Jesus Christ will come again to the earth personally, visibly, and bodily.* Why did the authors of the essentials decide to include all of those? It's because each one has caused problems in the church since the very beginning.

Jesus will return personally. He isn't going to send a representative in His place but will be coming Himself to take us home. That's important because tons of people have tried to pass themselves off as God's prophet with a new revelation or the new messiah or even the second coming of Christ. Major world religions like Islam and Mormonism and the Moonies were started by folks like this, folks who claimed that God had sent them to improve upon the message Jesus gave.

But Jesus preached that He Himself would come again. In Luke, He says, “Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, claiming, “I am he,” and, “The time is near.” Do not follow them.” There's no need to get worried that you missed something. When Jesus returns, it will not be by proxy; no angel is going to come in Jesus' name. There is no further revelation for us to understand. Jesus Himself will come personally.

He will come visibly. We will see Him return. This shouldn't be hard to believe in the modern world where even the third world has cell phones and communication devices as sophisticated as ours. Whenever and wherever Jesus comes back, within a matter of minutes the world will see and know. While some people won't believe, they will before long.

His visible return stops the idea of a “spiritual” return of Jesus dead in its tracks. Jehovah's Witnesses believe that Jesus returned invisibly in 1914. No way to prove it or disprove that kind of claim, is there? A few of us remember a guy named Harold Camping who got a lot of press in 2011 saying that the world was going to end according to biblical prophecy. When it didn't happen, he claimed that there had been a “spiritual” judgment day. But Scripture is clear – Revelation 1:7 says, “Look, [Jesus] is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him.”

And Jesus' return will be a bodily return. He won't be some sort of otherworldly spirit. His body will be a spiritual body, which means that it won't be corruptible by death. That will be true of the bodies we receive in the resurrection too. But it will still be a body. He still comes in the flesh. Right after His resurrection, the disciples could see and touch Him. Jesus said directly, “Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.” He will come back just the way He was when He left the earth. He will be recognizable; He will be embodied; it will be Him in the flesh. When Jesus comes again, there will be no doubts. No one will mistake it for moviemaking magic or some kind of computer trickery. We will know.

1 and 2 Thessalonians were meant to reassure the early church about the second coming. They were so worried about missing it that some of them had stopped working entirely; they were just sitting around waiting. In 2 Thessalonians 2, Paul writes to the church, “Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come.” The reason that Jesus, the apostle Paul, and the apostle John went to great lengths to describe what would happen before Jesus’ return was that no one would think that they’d missed it. That simply won’t happen. Our passage today tells us that it will come suddenly and unexpectedly, but it won’t be hidden.

Now let’s look at the “why” of Jesus’ return: *He will come again to judge the living and the dead, and to consummate history and the eternal plan of God.* There are three unique things Jesus will do upon his return. First, He will judge the living and the dead. Our passage this morning says the dead in Christ will rise first, and then all living Christians will be caught up to Christ in the clouds as well. Eventually – we aren’t certain when – every last person who has ever lived will be resurrected. And then there will be judgment.

Judgment is something every last person faces, Christian and non-Christian alike. We know the central outcome of judgment – those who have believed God and trusted in Him for salvation in this lifetime will be delivered; they will spend eternity with Him. Those who have rejected Him will be rejected by Him. But judgment is more than that. We will also be judged about how we lived and spent our time and about how we did or did not glorify God. We do not understand exactly how, but this judgment will affect our eternity, even as we spend it with God.

In Matthew 12:26, Jesus says, “But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken.” The apostle Paul teaches in Romans 14:12, “So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.” Revelation 20:12 details the apostle John’s vision of the end of time, and he writes, “The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books.” The apostle James, teaching his church, says, “Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.” The Old Testament is littered with references to the day of the LORD. The only thing more expected by the ancient people of Israel than the Messiah was God’s final judgment of the world.

This should speak to us right now. If we know Jesus and follow Him, we will be saved. But if we follow Him, we should want to know where He’s going so we can walk in His steps. If we want to be judged truly faithful, we should get ready now by reading Scripture, by being a part of the fellowship where Scripture is taught, and doing what God commands. If we aren’t aware of what God expects of us, how can we live it out?

Pastor Paul from Bethel and I were just talking about articles we had both read recently about dealing with young leaders – not just attendees, but leaders – in the church who were also in sexual relationships outside of marriage – many of whom had never heard the church teach on the ethics and morality presented in the Bible. It’s the church’s fault that we haven’t presented the full message of God to our young people. But it falls on all of us to be prepared for Christ’s second coming, to be able to live lives that we can account for when judgment comes.

Next stop: *Jesus is coming to consummate history*. That word means to “complete” or “make perfect.” When Jesus comes again, He will redeem history and complete its story. When Jesus comes again, history will make sense. It will become clear to all that history speaks to the goodness of God and His compassion on us in spite of our rebellion. We will see that those things that cause so much pain – war, death, destruction – are ultimately a result of our desire to be our own gods. And we will see that everything good in the history of all things comes from Him and shows His plan.

Jesus’ second coming will refocus history. Now, history is disconnected and lacks purpose. It’s a cataloging of events. We try to see patterns; we learn from history. But even then, even the strongest believer cannot fathom how God is making it all work together. When Jesus returns, not only will He bring an end to human history as we think of it now, the grand design of what God has been doing throughout history will be revealed.

And that leads to the final “why”: *Jesus is coming again to consummate the eternal plan of God*. Jesus will finish what was started long ago. Back in the garden, when humanity fell headlong into sin, God promised that the head of the serpent that tempted Adam and Eve would be crushed. The final victory over sin and death and the enemy of God will be achieved at the second coming.

When Jesus died on the cross for sin, the power of sin and death was destroyed, but they still continue in this world. Jesus rose from the dead, proof of His victory. But He is not done yet. He will not be finished until everything is put back into place, once all is set right again. Jesus doesn’t need to come and die again; all He needs do is return and establish His Father’s kingdom. But until that happens, God’s plan will not have been carried out in full. When Jesus arrives, then we can shout, “The battle is over!”

That’s where the final lines of today’s essential tenet come in. “Even so, come, Lord Jesus!” These are the next to last words of Scripture in Revelation 22:20. It is the heart’s cry of every faithful follower. “Even so” is the King James translation of the word “Amen,” which means, “we believe it.” Come, Lord Jesus! We believe you! Finish your work! Come and rescue us! Save us from ourselves! Complete what you started so that we might be made perfect and whole and holy. Come so that we can be with you forever! Come so that all strife and wars may end and all sufferings cease! Come so that we might enjoy your presence and know your goodness face to face!

Now that we understand it – do we believe it? I think of all the tenets, it is the hardest one for us to face. It’s the simplest of them, but it requires us to take God on pure faith. We have the testimony of thousands within the Bible who encountered God directly, including those thousands who saw Jesus resurrected after His death. Millions across the years have testified to God’s work in their lives. We might believe that God can heal because we’ve seen people healed, for example. But when it comes to the future, all we have is God’s promise. The only evidence we have is that God has proven good to His word in the past, so we must trust Him with the future. That’s harder than we think. But it is a sign of genuine faith.

Why do we have to believe all this? Paul tells us twice in today's passage. After explaining Jesus' coming, he says, "Therefore encourage each other with these words." He tells us to be prepared, since the second coming will happen like a thief in the night, and what does he say right after that? "Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing."

Ultimately, the second coming of Christ is meant to encourage us as believers. We have a hard road to face. We live not for ourselves but for others as we pursue our Master. The world hates what we stand for. Persecution may not affect us much, but it affects huge parts of the church worldwide. We can be encouraged that Jesus is coming back to finish what He started in a visible, tangible way. We don't live in that state of not knowing like the Old Testament saints, who weren't certain that there was life after death at all. We don't have to content ourselves that Jesus will have a "spiritual" return that will just make the world a better place. We can be heartened by the truth that Jesus has not forgotten us. He will come back for all who have believed in Him.

So what's our final reaction to these truths? It's found in 1 Thessalonians 5. "Since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him."

Let's work together to be prepared for Jesus coming. Let us be self-controlled, not running after sins. Let's not be content with what this world has to offer. Let's be armored with faith and love – if they are our breastplate, faith and love not only open the hearts of those around us, they protect us when we suffer. The hope of salvation is to be our helmet, defending us against a culture that believes there is nothing but this life. Jesus died so we could live together with Him in this life and the next. We have been appointed to salvation. His second coming encourages us to act like it.

How might we encourage each other to be loving? How might we encourage each other to be self-controlled and faithful? Can we check on each other during the week? Can we study the Bible together? Can we serve our community and adopt it in Jesus' name? Absolutely. As we do so, may we remember that there is a point, a purpose, a plan beyond ourselves. We don't serve and love and bless to be good people. We do it because our Lord is coming back, and we want to be hard at work when He arrives.