

May 1, 2005
College Baptist Church

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Our Blessed Hope

Titus 2:11-14

Affirmation #12: The Last Things

"We believe in the personal and visible return of the Lord Jesus Christ to earth and the establishment of His kingdom. We believe in the resurrection of the body, the final judgment, the eternal felicity of the righteous and the endless suffering of the wicked."

According to our text this morning, God makes two appearances on earth. Titus 2:1 says he appeared once as grace incarnate: Jesus Christ in the flesh bringing salvation for all people and showing us how to live godly lives. Titus 2:13 says he is going to appear once more again in the future, as glory incarnate: our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, in the flesh, coming to take as his own possession the people who have purified themselves by their zeal in faith for good works.

This morning we're going to commemorate and celebrate one of those appearances when we gather at the Lord's Table. And we're going to study and celebrate the other appearing as we open up God's Word together to consider this 12th and last affirmation of our BGC doctrinal statement.

These are not two disconnected parts of one service. There are very important connections between Christ's first coming in grace and his second coming in glory. There are very important connections between this last affirmation and our gathering again on this first Sunday of the month to observe the ordinance of the Lord's Supper.

Let me just suggest three of the most important connections between the grace of the blessed cross and the glory of our blessed hope.

1. The historical reality of the first coming emphasizes the historical reality of the second.
2. The promise of the first allows us to live in hope today only because of the fulfillment of the second. The first coming is incomplete without the second.
3. The two comings together clearly teach us that the pathway to glory lies through the gateway of grace. No one comes to the Father except through the sacrificial work of the Son who bears our sins and dies the death that we deserve. The second coming is incomplete without the first.

1. The historical reality of the first coming emphasizes the historical reality of the second.

Sadly, there are many today who for all practical purposes consider the idea that Jesus Christ is going to reappear on earth in the future, possibly even the near future, to usher in the Kingdom of God to be the stuff of fairy tales and primitive mythology.

The astronomer, Carl Sagan, used to lump the Christian story of the return of Christ together with the story that the cow jumped over the moon. We might not be so surprised to hear someone with his materialist philosophy dismiss the second coming that way. He would have dismissed the resurrection of the first coming with the same logic.

But even so-called Christian commentaries say things like this: the second coming is "like Creation, in a real sense timeless [always past, always present, and always future]; not an historical even, but the underlying purpose of history and the summing up of all things in Christ." [William Neil, Moffatt, *Thessalonians*, 1950]

Or this: "We have to conclude that the End is something with which men will never have to reckon in practical terms, again excluding the possible destruction of our own planet, and that it is as wrong to think of a real physical End which God achieves in some public way as it is to think of a real physical Beginning." [E. Best, *Thessalonians*, 1972]

Worse yet, the church around the world is full of people who simply believe in the blessed hope of Christ's appearing the way they believe in the existence of quarks and black holes, or galaxies outside the Milky Way. They

wouldn't deny them because they're reported on good authority. But beliefs like that don't really make much difference in the way we live our lives.

That is not the way the earliest Christians who knew Jesus in his first appearing thought about his return. They looked for it the way a mother looks for the return of her son who has been drafted and sent off to war. For that mother and for those apostles, this was a constant thought and preoccupation. That mother and those apostles waited eagerly for a real, historical return. Why? Because they never disconnected it for a moment from the wrenching historical reality of the departure and the separation.

The hope and expectation of the return of Jesus Christ in glory is one of the most often recurring themes in all the New Testament.

It all started in Acts 1:11 when 11 disciples are asking Jesus if he'll finally bring the Kingdom of God to his people now that he has been resurrected and they're suddenly stunned when "he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight. While they were gazing into heaven as he went, two men stood by them in white robes and said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'"

From that moment onward, the letters of the apostles are full of the blessed hope that Christ would return and fulfill the promise that his grace on the cross had begun.

John the Evangelist says (Jn 14:3), "I go and prepare a place for you, and I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also."

Levi, also known as Matthew, writes (16:27) that "the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done."

In the earliest Christian document that we still have a copy of, Paul the apostle writes the Thessalonians (1 Thess 4:16) that "the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord."

Later he told them (2 Thess 1:8) that the Lord Jesus will ill the lawless one with the breath of his mouth and bring him to nothing by the appearance of his coming."

Paul writes the Philippians (Phil 3:20) that "our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body."

He charged Timothy (1 Tim 4:1) to preach on the grounds that Christ Jesus is certain to appear and to bring in his kingdom.

He warned the Corinthians (1 Cor 4:5) that the Lord is coming to bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and to disclose the purposes of the heart. And at that time each one will receive his commendation from God."

The writer to the Hebrews wrote his church (in 9:28) that Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him."

And the book of Revelation, of course, records in great detail how "heaven opens and one appears who is called Faithful and True, who judges in righteousness and makes war on his enemies. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords." (Rev 19:11-16)

The victory of the King of kings opens the way in ch. 21 for the Bride of the Lamb to come to her wedding, and the new Jerusalem comes down from heaven full of the glory of God (21:9f).. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb (21:22f).

Behold, says Jesus in ch.22, "I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay everyone for what he has done." The very last words of the entire Bible, in fact, (22:20) are the words of Jesus, "Surely, I am coming soon." And the response of those who knew him in his first coming: "Amen, Come Lord Jesus!"

Disciples who remember Jesus in the flesh in his first coming spent the rest of their lives eagerly waiting for his return at his second coming. Disciples who gather at this table gather to remember Jesus in the flesh -- in the body and in the blood -- in the grace of his first appearing. To gather at this table then is to live like the first disciples who knew him eagerly waiting for the personal, visible, historical return of Jesus, who we are promised will come in the same way as the first apostles saw him go.

The historical reality of Christ's first coming in grace emphasizes the historical reality of the second. And it builds in those who remember the physical flesh and body of Christ an eager and blessed hope of seeing him appear in the flesh again.

That is part of the reason, I think, why Paul warns the Corinthians at the Lord's Supper that "anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself." One sure test of the genuineness of our faith in the death and resurrection of Christ is whether it stirs in us this eager hope for the personal, visible return of the Lord Jesus Christ to earth and the establishment of his kingdom.

The second important connections between the grace of the blessed cross and the glory of our blessed hope I mentioned was this: that the promise of the first coming allows us to have a life full of hope today only because of the fulfillment of the second coming. The first coming is incomplete without the second.

If the only thing the death and resurrection did for us was to pay the price for our sin, but then to leave us without any promises for the future on the foundation of that work, we would be a forgiven but hopeless lot of people. The importance of the work of Christ is that all the promises of God find their 'yes' in him!

Our faith doesn't just assent to some historical facts that Christ died for my sins and rose again. Our faith rests in the promises for the future that Christ's death and resurrection now hold open to us!

The second coming is a constant reminder that faith isn't just a matter of agreeing with some doctrinal facts. Faith means leaning all of your security on the future that God offers you because of those historical facts and no longer leaning on the flimsy promises of the world.

That's how the first coming is incomplete without the second. That's how the celebration of the Lord's Supper is incomplete without the blessed hope that Christ will appear on earth again in glory "to save those who are eagerly waiting for him."

It is utterly crucial to our proper discerning of the body at the Lord's Table then that we focus this celebration upon the actual hope that completes it: the Blessed Hope is the appearing in glory of Jesus Christ himself.

The elements of this table do not just purchase for us mortgages on some mansion just over the hilltop in that bright land where we'll never grow old. The elements of this table don't just assure us that Christ will rescue us from tribulation. In fact, these elements are reminders that like Christ in this world we will have tribulation, not be taken out of the tribulation.

(In another sermon someday maybe I can explain why I believe Christ only returns once more, after the Great Tribulation, to rapture the saints, and not before and again after it, as the Scofield Bible and the Left Behind series map out the end times.)

Not just streets of gold. Not just an escape from hell. Not just eternal life in heaven, as though it doesn't really matter whether God is present there or not.

The only hope worth so eagerly waiting for, that mattered to the first apostles who saw Jesus taken up, is the appearing of the glory of Jesus Christ himself. Anything less would be a meager grace and unworthy of the ultimate and eternal sacrifice of the Son of God on the cross.

The cross and the coming are connected because the historicity of the sacrifice emphasizes for us the historicity of the hope.

The cross and the coming are connected because only such a glorious coming makes sense out of such an unfathomable sacrifice as we commemorate at this Table.

The third important connection between the grace of the blessed cross and the glory of our blessed hope that I mentioned was this:

Together they clearly teach us that the pathway to glory lies through the gateway of grace. No one comes to the Father except through the sacrificial work of the Son who bears our sins and dies the death that we deserve. The second coming is as incomplete without the first as the first is incomplete without the second.

In the first century, the Jewish people, including most of the apostles themselves through a good part of Jesus' ministry, believed that the Messiah should only need to appear one time and lead Israel to kingdom and power and glory forever. They were very bewildered that Jesus came with all the power to do that and instead of using his power went to a cross to die. For many Jewish observers that disqualified him from being the Messiah at all, and they're still waiting for their Messiah to come.

The same may be true for lots of our own assumptions about how God should behave in our lives. The first thing we want God to show up and do for us is to work his power to make us healthier and stronger and richer and more important.

And God says to us, I do desire that you should have life and have it abundantly. But then he says to us as he said to his own Son, the way to arrive at the kingdom and the power and the glory forever is through laying down your life for needy, sinful neighbors. The pathway to glory lies along the route of grace.

Whoever would follow after Christ, let him take up his cross and follow him.

That is the message of the Table before us this morning. It is a message of hope: we believe in the resurrection of the body, the final judgment, the eternal felicity of the righteous as well as the endless suffering of the wicked. Better yet it is a message of our Blessed Hope: we believe in the personal and visible return of the Lord Jesus Christ to earth and the establishment of His kingdom. But the Table also reminds us that the rewards of life and glory and felicity lie along the Via Dolorosa, the way of the cross of Jesus Christ, "who gave himself for us to redeem us and by the furnace of affliction to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.