

## **IT'S ALL ABOUT JESUS 4: "THE RETURNING REDEEMER"**

This morning we conclude our mini-series dealing with our 2008 theme: **IT'S ALL ABOUT JESUS**. A brief reminder: we began by considering how his BIRTH fulfilled the multiple prophecies of the OT. We pondered that his LIFE was marked by an unusual blend of authoritative and compassionate teaching. We discovered that his DEATH and RESSURECTION provide forgiveness and transformation for those who willingly receive them. So here is a summary that might be helpful:

HE WAS BORN MIRACULOUSLY

HE LIVED PURPOSEFULLY

HE TAUGHT UNUSUALLY

HE DIED WILLINGLY

HE ROSE TRIUMPHANTLY

HE'S RETURNING VICTORIOUSLY

Christ's death and resurrection; as monumental as those "history altering" events have proven to be; are not the end. There is another chapter, a sequel, an extended version of this story, that has been mentioned in the OT, runs vaguely through the gospels, and becomes full blown with the writings of Paul in the later books of the NT, but which is most clearly revealed by Luke in the early days after Jesus' resurrection. Here it is recorded for our consideration in Acts 1:11:

*"Men of Galilee," they said, "why are you standing here staring into heaven? Jesus has been taken from you into heaven, but someday he will return from heaven in the same way you saw him go!" Acts 1:11*

This hillside experience between some bewildered disciples, and their dearly departed friend; mirrors much that has since happened concerning this subject, even to this modern day.

In the immediate years following Jesus' departure; the disciples felt his promised return to be imminent; so they sold their belongings and lived communally, to make it easier for God to gather up his faithful sons and daughters. When this plan failed to come to pass, new arrangements had to be made.

For centuries since, impassioned preachers and 'wanna-be' prophets have spent countless hours... (years) studying and even predicting that they knew when Jesus would return to earth. Those predictions (and many of those prophets) have come and gone, while followers wondered 'what to do now' as the dates and times came and went.

Many of the ancient and modern cults have thrived on a "doomsday" theology of Christ's return, and have left ruined lives and broken lies in their wake.

Even today with the impressive "Left Behind" book-series phenomena that recently swept across this country; believers are wondering what to make of this promise made by innocent angels so long ago. Will it happen just as Tim LaHaye or other modern writers predict? Not likely. Will it happen at all? Some wonder/doubt/debate/and disagree. Will it happen in my lifetime or yours? We all wonder at that one. Will it happen soon...wouldn't we all like to know?

My philosophy / theology about the Return of Christ can be summarized in these two simple morsels:

One, if Jesus didn't know when he would return to earth, then we don't need to either. Jesus repeatedly reminded his disciples that "*no man, not even the Son of God, knows the day or the hour of His return.*" Spending time studying about this subject might be fine; but obsessing and wasting precious time worrying about something we don't have any control over; while we are neglecting some way more important things which we do have control over; seems counter productive to the whole "becoming disciple" project; to me.

Secondly, we need to live like Jesus is coming today, and work like he's not coming for 1000 years. That means, my friends, it's all about getting ready. Getting ready is not about trying to figure out and fix the date; so we can sow our wild oats till the last possible second, then hurry and get our lives right; just in the nick of time. No, being prepared for eternity begins at the moment we first begin learning about God; not when we think we've finished doing all our own "fun" things. When once we have prepared our hearts; then we need to finish our lives serving God, while serving others.

That being said, I know you care way more about what God has said about this 'return of Jesus', than what simple things I think; so lets take a look at the most famous passage dealing with this subject, and consider it's truths for a few minutes:

*And now, dear brothers and sisters, we want you to know what will happen to the believers who have died so you will not grieve like people who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and was raised to life again, we also believe that when Jesus returns, God will bring back with him the believers who have died.*

*We tell you this directly from the Lord: We who are still living when the Lord returns will not meet him ahead of those who have died. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a commanding shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God. First, the Christians who have died will rise from their graves. Then, together with them, we who are still alive and remain on the earth will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Then we will be with the Lord forever. So encourage each other with these words...*

*For, God chose to save us through our Lord Jesus Christ, not to pour out his anger on us. Christ died for us so that, whether we are dead or alive when he returns, we can live with him forever. So encourage each other and build each other up, just as you are already doing. I Thessalonians 4:13-18 & 5:9-11*

It should go without saying that there are many...many things about this event that I don't understand, but there are at least 5 things here I can see that are important, let me just mention them.

## **1. THE RETURN**

*...for the Lord himself will come down... I Thess. 4:16*

Let there be no question (among all the other questions) that Jesus Christ is returning to this earth. The time and date are insignificant, the manner and mode of transportation; irrelevant, the purpose and agenda...priceless!

Jesus Christ will return to earth to finish what he started. The long arduous journey from heaven as an infant to grow and live and teach and die and rise again, was but half the story...shoot; in light of eternity, they are a bit part of the story. Jesus is coming again to earth, to bring his followers back to heaven with him. There for all of the rest of eternity, unbroken fellowship, worship and paradise will be for those who know God, through the forgiveness and transformation of Jesus.

He's not sending another prophet, there will be no more warning signs, this time it's personal! The promise: "I'll be back!" is no movie line, it's a personal promise, and Jesus will see to its fulfillment...personally. He is coming again, just as he left, physically, personally, purposefully! We best be ready!

## **2. THE RESURRECTION**

*...the Christians who have died will rise from their graves...I Thess. 4:16*

Here's where it gets weird, and I don't get it! There will be some sort of resurrection for the believers who have already died. Now, I believe in the resurrection, it's the bodies I don't get. I know the context of this passage is people's fears about dying before the Lord returned, but I don't understand the need for the bodies. It appears from the scripture that Jesus will return from heaven with all the spirits of those believers who die, awaiting his appointed time to return.

The bible is pretty clear that at the moment of death, a person's spirit returns immediately to heaven. The bible also speaks of getting a new body or, some form thereof, when we enter into eternity. So if we get new bodies, and the spirits of those who have died are already with Jesus, why do we need these old ones? I don't know the answer, and if you must know... take it up with your creator when you get there. It doesn't really mean much to me!

I think the point is really that Paul wanted to assure his followers there in Thessalonica that dying before Christ returns is no big deal, in fact, those who have died will be with Jesus before those who are still living when he returns. That's the best I can offer.

### **3. THE RAPTURE**

*...then we who are still alive will be caught up in the clouds...* I Thess. 4:17

This is an interesting concept. Did you know the word Rapture never appears in the Bible? Yet it is touted as this important doctrine. The word Trinity doesn't appear either, but we believe pretty strongly in that, don't we. The word rapture comes from the Latin rendition of the Greek word translated "caught up", as used here and elsewhere by Paul. It simply means; that part of Jesus' purpose in returning is to gather those followers who are living, and return them with those who have died; to heaven. Then will be set in motion a whole series of other events that usher in eternity as we will experience it in heaven...whatever that reality turns out to be.

I believe in the rapture, I believe Jesus will come to take us home, but I've gotten past using this reality as a source of fear to drive people to accept Jesus, and 'Get right with God'. I don't think our motivation to be saved ought to be 'fire insurance', but because it's the right thing to do. I've often said, the reason I'm a Christian, is not because of the prospect of heaven or the threat of hell; but because I've become convinced it is simply the best way to live! That being said, part of the "return" has to do with capturing those believers across this globe, and maybe in other galaxies we do not know; and bringing us all to heaven.

### **4. THE REUNION**

*...then we will be with the Lord forever...* I Thess. 4:17

Now we're getting to the best part...at least I can understand this.

There will be a sweet reunion of loved ones who've gone before, with ancients of history, with famous people and infidels who became believers, with saints and thieves rescued at their last hours of breath. All that will be great...I'm sure you are already picturing your loved ones...but the best part is...we will be with the LORD forever!

That reality will overshadow any regret over missed opportunities. That reality will overwhelm us with Christ's presence; henceforth only a dream; but now personally real. I know there will be thousands, millions even clamoring to sit next to him, but being in the presence of Jesus, we'll feel like we are the only ones there; we'll be so overcome with gratitude, we'll soon forget all those insignificant questions. We'll be so overwhelmed with His presence; we'll break into unending songs of praise and thanksgiving. We'll be so blown away by what this sweet reunion will render; that all the memories of this life; all the troubles we have seen; all the rejections we have felt; all the abuses we have endured; all the heartaches we have felt; all the sins we've committed, all the time we have wasted...will not even be a distant memory...they will be nothing at all! In the presence of Jesus, there will be no more tears, no more pain, no more sadness, no more loneliness, no more fear, no more death!

## **5. THE REDEMPTION**

*...for God choose to save us through our Lord Jesus Christ... I Thess. 5:9*

We close this message the same way we have closed each of the prior three. By considering the choices we have to make. But please note, please note here that it is God who choose to save us...our redemption is determined by our choice, but we can choose only because we have already been chosen.

This redemption is different than our salvation...this one is for all the marbles, this one is for all eternity. I cannot imagine or fathom the length of eternity...I just know I don't want to spend one minute, anywhere but with the one who loved me, created me, forgives me, calls me, uses me, encourages me, and cares most intimately for me.

This redemption is not just of my soul, and not just from my past; this is redemption for my body, my mind, my present, my future, my eternity...and your's too!

My friends, this unending end to our scant look at Jesus must culminate with a brief reminder...It's all about Jesus, from beginning to ending...its all about Jesus. From birth to life, to death and beyond...it's all about Jesus. From doubt and despair, or from rejoicing and celebration; we come to this point of decision...because it's all about Jesus. I will not beg or plead, just offer once again; YOU are all about Jesus, he Loves you and wants to live in you. He loves you and wants a relationship with you. He loves you and wants to give you a clean new beginning. He loves you and has proven that by dying for you. He loves you and has promised to bring it to complete fruition when he comes again to take his loyal followers home. You want to take a chance and miss that? Then you better act now.

A sick man turned to his doctor, as he was preparing to leave the examination room and said, "Doctor, I am afraid to die. Tell me what lies on the other side." Very quietly, the doctor said, "I don't know." "You don't know? You, a Christian man, do not know what is on the other side?"

As the doctor was holding the handle of the door; on the other side came a sound of scratching and whining. When he opened the door, a dog sprang into the room and leaped onto him with an eager show of gladness.

Turning to the patient, the doctor said, "Did you notice my dog? He's never been in this room before. He didn't know what was inside. He knew nothing except that his master was here, and when the door opened, he sprang in without fear. I know little of what is on the other side of death, but I do know one thing. I know my Master is there, and that is enough."

Let us pray

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