

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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**THE ESSENTIALS OF OUR FAITH:
THE RETURN OF THE KING**

Acts 1:1-11

Jesus. Is. Coming. Again. Did you know that? Do you believe that? He really is coming again. The Bible is really quite clear about it. As was Jesus Himself. The doctrine of the promised return of Christ is not a piece of theological fiction. It is not a sort of religious fairy tale, though it does have a “happily ever after” ending. Not for everyone, of course.

But for everyone who believes in Him and trusts in Him with a childlike faith – including you, I trust,
for everyone who has personally experienced the wonder of His saving grace – the grace that comes free of charge to people who don’t deserve it and never will, like me ... and you,
for every person – young or old, strong or weak, rich or poor – who has received Him as Savior and Lord of their lives,
for everyone who has been “born again” (John 3:3) of the Spirit of God,
for everyone who has become “a new creation” in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17),
for everyone whose ultimate hope both for this life and for eternity is not in self or science or education or morality or money or medicine or politics or politicians, but in Jesus Christ our Lord,
His coming again will be the inauguration of a real-life, never-ending “happily ever after” for all eternity – which is, of course, a concept our finite minds cannot even begin to comprehend.

The promise of Christ’s return is not an incidental extra included in the unfolding drama of redemption as an afterthought that really has nothing – or nothing of significance, at least – to do with the outworking of God’s eternal plan. It is not a non-essential as far as God is concerned. So, it cannot be a non-essential for us. You see, to carry out God’s plan of redemption, to rescue and ransom a world of spiritually lost, rebellious sinners, Jesus – the one, true, eternal Son of God, the long-awaited Messiah from heaven and the only Savior of sinners – because of His incomparable and unfailing love for us, took on our flesh and blood, and came and lived among us, in order to give His life for us. As we profess in the Apostles’ Creed, He was:

... conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead, and buried.
He descended to the dead.

On the third day He rose again from the dead.

He ascended into heaven and
sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty
 (“the right hand” signifies the place of supreme exaltation,
the place of highest honor in all of God’s kingdom)

from which He will come to judge
the quick (i.e., the living) and the dead.

The promise of Christ's return is not some kind of pie-in-the-sky dream. It does not belong to the category of things we should just wish to be so, if it could be so, even though we are not so sure it will ever really happen. No. The promise of Christ's return is as sure as the return of Gen. Douglas MacArthur to the Philippines in World War II. Just a few months after Pearl Harbor, in March 1942, with the war in the Pacific going badly, MacArthur and his family were forced to evacuate the island of Corregidor, as the Japanese threatened to overrun the Philippines. After arriving safely in Australia, MacArthur made a speech in which he famously said to the people of the Philippines: "I shall return." Two and a half years later, in October 1944, with the tide of war in the Pacific having turned against the Japanese, Gen. MacArthur waded ashore onto the Philippine island of Leyte and made a broadcast in which he said: "People of the Philippines, I have returned." Gen. MacArthur said he would return. And he kept his word.

So, too, Jesus will return. The Bible says He will. Jesus Himself said He would. And He will. His coming again is as sure as the rising of the sun in the east every morning without fail.

Look at our Scripture text in Acts 1. Luke tells us that for a period of 40 days after His resurrection, Jesus appeared to His disciples on multiple occasions and talked with them "about the kingdom of God" (1:3). He reminded them of the promise of God the Father to give them the Holy Spirit (1:4-5), a promise fulfilled ten days after Jesus' ascension into heaven (1:9-11), 50 days after His resurrection, on the day of the Jewish celebration of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-21).

From the question the disciples asked Jesus in verse 6, it is pretty clear that Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of God has not sunk in yet. The disciples were still hoping Jesus was going to set up a political, territorial kingdom. And they wanted to know when. They wanted to know if now was the time. They did not yet fully grasp that the kingdom of God is not an entity like a nation or an empire that depends on political or military power. God's kingdom is spiritual in character, not territorial. "The kingdom of God," as John Stott writes, "is His rule set up in the lives of His people by the Holy Spirit" (Stott, *The Spirit, The Church, and The World*, 42). Where Jesus is rightly exalted and worshiped as Savior and Lord, there is the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is established in the heart, and then flows out of the heart into life. While it is spiritual in its character, there is ultimately no area of a person's life that is untouched by the kingship, or the kingly rule, of God.

The disciples of Jesus still had much to learn about the kingdom of God. As do we.

Jesus did not want His disciples to get hung up on their questions of when and how. He wanted them instead to catch a vision for their mission (and ours) – to be His witnesses where we are and in ever-enlarging circles until the whole world knows of Jesus and His saving power. He also wanted the disciples to understand where their power to witness would come

from. “You will receive power,” Jesus says in verse 8, “when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses ... to the ends of the earth.”

Having given them this commission and the promise of the Holy Spirit, Jesus then ascends into heaven. He is taken up into heaven. And the disciples see it. The disciples see Him go. It happens right before their eyes. I can picture them all just standing there, looking up, with their mouths open, thinking to themselves: “I don’t believe what I just saw!” But it *was* real. It really *did* happen. While they are all standing there, two angel-messengers sent from God, appear to the disciples to confirm that what they had just seen was real and to assure the disciples that Jesus will one day return. “This same Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you saw Him go into heaven” (1:11).

Jesus. Is. Coming. Again. Jesus Himself spoke of His coming again on a number of occasions, often using the title “Son of Man,” which was His favorite way of referring to Himself in the Gospels. The title “Son of Man” actually comes from the book of Daniel in the Old Testament. In Daniel 7:13-14, Daniel describes a vision God has given him:

Behold, with the clouds of heaven
there came one like a son of man,
and he came to the Ancient of Days
and was presented before Him.
And to him was given dominion
and glory and a kingdom,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion,
which shall not pass away,
and his kingdom is one
that shall not be destroyed.

It is a powerful image, isn’t it? Jesus intentionally applied this image to Himself, using it in reference to His coming again. For example, He says in Matthew 16:27 that “the Son of Man is going to come with His angels in the glory of the Father.” In Luke 9:26, as well: “Whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when He comes in His glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.

In Matthew 24 and 25, Jesus speaks at length about the signs of the times – signs that the end of the age is at hand and His return is near. Listen to what He says to His disciples, first in Matthew 24:

Verse 27: “As lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be.”

Verse 30: “The sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.”

Verses 36-39: “Concerning that day and hour” – i.e., the exact time of Christ’s return – “no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah (and his family) entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.”

Verses 42:44: “Stay alert, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore, you must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.”

Then, in Matthew 25, Jesus tells first the parable of the ten virgins, to show the importance of living in constant readiness for His return, since we don’t know the day or the hour He will come back (25:1-13).

Next, in verses 14-30, Jesus tells the parable of the talents to show that there will be a day, when Christ returns, on which each of us will have to give an accounting for what we have done with the gifts, abilities, and opportunities God has entrusted to us.

Then, in verses 31-46, Jesus gives us a picture of the final judgment when He will separate the sheep from the goats (25:32-33). That is, those who receive His blessing and the gift of eternal life will be set apart from those who receive condemnation from God because of their failure to show mercy and compassion to people in need. Notice how Jesus sets the scene in verse 31: “When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne” from which, as it says in the Apostles’ Creed, “He will judge the living and the dead.”

To those who have ears to hear, Jesus leaves no doubt about the certainty of His return. *When* He will return, no one knows. *That* He will return is something you can count on. The apostle Paul says we can count on it. In Philippians 3, he writes that though this world is filled with “enemies of the cross of Christ” (3:18), “our (true) citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.”

In 1 Thessalonians 4:15-16, Paul declares: “According to the Lord’s own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep” (i.e., those who have died before the return of Christ). “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,” says Paul, “encourage each other with these words.”

These words and the promise we have of Christ’s return in triumph are to encourage our souls. They are to buoy us up. They are to give renewed courage and strength to our hearts.

They are to build up our faith and to keep us from losing heart as we live our days in this world so filled with devils and evil.

Jesus. Is. Coming. Again. And when He comes, He will make everything right. Encourage each other with these words.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews also declares the certainty of Christ's promised return. Listen to what he says in Hebrews 9:26-28: "(Christ) has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of Himself. Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people. And He will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for Him."

Are you waiting for Him? Are you looking forward expectantly to His return?

I want to talk more about the return of Christ next Sunday, unless Jesus comes back before then, in which case there will be no need to do so. Though many Bible-believing Christians have disagreements over some of the details, the promise of His return is not a non-essential. On the contrary, it is an essential of our faith with major implications for how we live in the meantime, in the in-between time where we find ourselves – between the first coming of our Savior "in the fullness of time" (Galatians 4:4) two thousand years ago and the time of His second coming, which, as Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:3, "will come like a thief in the night."

Knowing that He may come at any time, our task is to be ready for His coming. Our task is to make sure our hearts are settled in Christ, trusting Him and Him alone as our Savior and Lord. Our mission – the same mission Jesus gave His followers just before He went up into heaven – is to be His witnesses right here and to the ends of the earth, inviting others to join us in following Him.

From the days of my youth, I remember a song made famous in the world of Christian music by Bill and Gloria Gaither, entitled "The King is Coming." Some of you probably remember it too. Listen to the words:

The Market place is empty
 No more traffic in the streets
 All the builders' tools are silent
 No more time to harvest wheat
 Busy housewives cease their labors
 In the courtroom no debate
 Work on earth has been suspended
 As the King comes thro' the gate
 The King is coming
 The King is coming
 I just heard the trumpet sounding
 And now his face I see

The King is coming
 The King is coming
 Praise God He's coming for me
 Happy faces line the hallway
 Those whose lives have been redeemed
 Broken homes that He has mended
 Those from prison He's set free
 Little children and the aged
 Hand in hand stand all aglow
 Who were crippled, broken, ruined
 Clad in garments white as snow
 I can hear the chariots rumble
 I can see the marching throng
 And the flurry of God's trumpets
 Spell the end of sin and wrong
 Regal robes are now unfolding
 Heaven's grandstands all in place
 Heaven's choir is now assembled
 Start to sing Amazing Grace
 The King is coming, the King is coming
 Praise God He's coming for me.

And for you. And for all who eagerly await His return. *Maranatha*. That's Aramaic, "Come, Lord Jesus."

Lord, let it be so. Amen.