**The Glorious Return of Christ**

Acts 1:9-11; 1 Thes. 4:13-18

Have you ever had **an extended time of separation** from a loved one?

* Your son or daughter is deployed overseas with the military.
* Your husband or wife is away for a few weeks on business.
* An illness keeps you from seeing a close friend or relative.

**For me and Kristin** there was a school year between us. So after I graduated and became a youth pastor we had a year before we could get married and be together. She was 200 miles away - and I would drive my Dodge Colt to visit a couple of times each month. But mostly we were apart, talking on this old device called a LAND LINE. Text messages and video calls were not yet a thing. It was 1998.

So when she graduated and three weeks later we got married, it was a wonderful joy to finally be together! In our season of separation, though I was a 22 year old youth pastor surrounded by attractive and attentive teenage girls, any temptation I might have felt was nothing in comparison to my love for Kristin and my desire to be with her. I fought to honor her with my thoughts and life. I worked to save for a ring and to prepare for our life together.

**Be encouraged**, brothers and sisters. Though we are in a time of SEPARATION, Jesus is coming back soon! This is our blessed hope! This is our joyful assurance! This is our inspiration to remain holy, prepared as a bride for our bridegroom. This is our motivation to work hard, faithfully serving our Master so He will be pleased with us when He comes back. Listen again to 1 Thes. 4:

“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**. Therefore ***encourage one another*** with these words.” 1 Thessalonians 4:17

Right now is a time of separation. But ***our Bridegroom is coming*** - and we will be with Him forever! Be encouraged! Don’t lose heart! Press on in the battle - because it is a battle! But the Lord Jesus has already defeated sin and death - and He will come back to destroy all remaining enemies and to make all things new.

We have two parts to our message today - first we will see ***three characteristics*** of the return of Christ, then we will talk about how that applies to us - ***three exhortations*** for us, since Jesus is coming back soon.

What will the return of Christ be like? It is not for us to know WHEN He will return. But we do know some key facts about WHAT it will be like when He does!

**The Return of Christ will be:**

1. Personal

“**This Jesus**, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come ***in the same way*** as you saw him go into heaven.” Acts 1:11

Before ascending into heaven, Jesus led the disciples out of the city of Jerusalem, up the Mount of Olives ***to the village of Bethany***. It was a walk of a little over a mile, reversing the path of His Triumphal Entry. Instead of a large crowd of fans who would soon turn against him and call for His crucifixion, Jesus is back with his faithful 11 apostles, like a return to the Garden of Gethsemane. No one fell asleep this time on the Mount of Olives. Jesus gave His final commission, lifted His hands to bless them and “was carried up into heaven.”

The point here is that it was **ACTUALLY JESUS** who ascended - the literal man, Jesus of Nazareth - who literally, physically died and also literally, physically rose from the dead - that same Jesus ascended into heaven. This wasn’t a hallucination, vision or dream - this was a real, physical, personal event. And the same will be true when Jesus comes back. The Return of Christ is not an idea to give us warm fuzzies. It is **a real, physical, factual event** in which the literal, physical person called Jesus the Christ of Nazareth, will Himself step down - onto that same spot on the Mount of Olives.

Jesus’ return will be personal. It will be HIM - our Savior, our Lord, our Bridegroom. We feel the pain of separation from Him now, but we will be with Him personally forever! That is the first joyful reality of the return of Christ. Second:

**The Return of Christ will be:**

1. Glorious

“And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, ***he was lifted up***, and a cloud took him out of their sight.” Acts 1:9

***Jesus descended*** from heaven to earth, into obscurity, suffering and all the way to death. But on the third day, He rose and the downward arrow suddenly reversed course and rebounded upward. Because Jesus humbled Himself and was obedient unto death, God the Father exalted Him to the highest place!

This is the wonder and ***glory of our Savior***! The glorious Son of God DESCENDED not only to earth but to the lowest recesses of the underworld, to hell itself and the domain of death. But He did not descend there to remain there, but to break the chains of death and to throw down the gates of hell, becoming the door to heaven. The One who descended, then ascended into glory.

That is what **the CLOUD** represents here - ***the presence and glory of God***. The Lord led the nation of Israel as a pillar of cloud by day. On Mount Sinai, as He met with Moses and gave the ten commandments, the whole mountain was surrounded by a terrifying cloud constantly rumbling with thunder and lightning. When the Temple was built, the Lord came down in a cloud of shekinah glory.

In Jesus’ earthly life, Peter, James and John experienced this already, on a different mountain. When **Jesus was transfigured** before them, those three key disciples got a glimpse of His infinite glory, which was almost entirely masked during His earthly life and ministry. But for those short moments, God the Father pulled back the curtain and let them see the Glorified Jesus, the Exalted Jesus - the unhindered, divine Son of God - wrapped in a CLOUD of blinding glory!

This may be ***why they kept staring at the cloud*** - wondering if it was a repeat of the transfiguration for the other 8 disciples who didn’t see it the first time. But no. Moses and Elijah didn’t appear to hang out with Jesus - two angels showed up and told the disciples to get back to their room and follow Jesus’ instructions.

Jesus’ ascension was GLORIOUS. It is vital to know that ***Jesus’ earthly life did not end with DEATH*** - it ended in glory, as He ascended into heaven, carried into the shekinah glory of the Father. His time on earth did not end with great human fanfare - but with an intimate farewell with his closest followers and the warm embrace of His Father in heaven.

The ascension gave a glimpse of the glory of Jesus. But it was just a glimpse. When Jesus comes back it will be the full revelation. Listen to a couple of the key passages that describe the return of Christ.

**The Glorious Return of Christ**

“For 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.” 1 Thes. 4:16

**The Glorious Return of Christ**

“Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems.” Revelation 19:11-12

**The Glorious Return of Christ**

“Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, 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.” Matthew 24:30

When Jesus came the first time it was in ***humble obscurity*** - born as a helpless baby on a quiet night in Bethlehem. When Jesus comes again there will not be anything humble, quiet or obscure about it. The whole world will freeze. The stars in the sky will fall down. The sky itself will roll up like a scroll.

The trumpet of God will sound like the final **referee whistle** that ends the game. Everyone will stop. Everyone will look up. And every eye will see Him at the same time, coming on the clouds of heaven. ***Every knee will bow before Him*** and every single person on earth will, in that moment, not only realize but will say out loud - “That is Jesus Christ. He is Lord.” The return of Christ will be personal, it will be glorious and third, it will be VICTORIOUS.

**The Return of Christ will be:**

1. Victorious

“And the armies of heaven… were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations.” Revelation 19:14-15

The One Rider on the white horse will be followed by a multitude on white horses - ***“the armies of heaven.”*** I think those on horses are believers who have died and are covered in the righteousness of Christ. Angelic hosts will also be there, just coming on their own wings without the need for flying white horses.

When Jesus returns it will be **to defeat all of His enemies** - all who stand against Him.The book of Revelation describes the evil trinity of the devil, the antichrist and the false prophet. When Jesus comes back He will very simply snatch the beast and the false prophet and toss them into the lake of fire - like a teacher taking two unruly 2nd graders by their ears and marching them to the principal’s office. (I’m sure you can’t do that anymore, but it was an effective approach back in the day.) The devil will have the same fate, but after a 1,000 year time out.

Think of that moment - ***that glorious, wondrous moment*** - when everyone who does evil, every power hungry tyrant, every filthy trafficker of slaves, every selfish, greedy business mogul - all of them in a single split second will collapse to their knees. It won’t be a struggle. It won’t be a long dramatic conflict. Jesus will “strike down the nations” with “the sword of his mouth.” In other words, He will just say, ***“Enough.”***

Remember how Jesus calmed the storm? He said, ***“Peace, be still.”*** That was it. Storm - over. When Jesus comes back the chaos and evil of this world will immediately stop. There will be peace. There will be justice. Every wrong will be made right. Every sin will be exposed. Every sinner laid bare for the world to see. Jesus, the light of the world, will expose all things. It will be terrifying… and GLORIOUS, when we see Jesus VICTORIOUS.

He will defeat all of His enemies. And the last enemy to be defeated is **DEATH itself**.

**The Return of Christ will be:**

1. Victorious

“For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command… And the dead in Christ will rise first.” 1 Thes. 4:16

When Jesus comes back it will be to gather ALL of His people together. Those who have died in Christ will be instantly reunited with their BODIES. They are with Jesus now, but not in a physical form. Their spirits will be reunited with glorified physical bodies in that moment when Jesus comes back and they rise from the dead as He did.

And in that same moment, all believers left on earth will be “caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.” In other words, some Christians will avoid death altogether - any who survive until His return!

“Therefore,” Paul concludes, ***“encourage one another with these words.”*** The return of Christ will be personal (it will really be HIM). It will be glorious - mind-blowingly wondrous. And it will be victorious - He will crush all of His enemies with a single word of command.

Are you encouraged? I hope so! Now, how does this apply? Three exhortations since our Lord is coming back soon. Let’s recite this creedal statement together. This is article nine of our statement of faith.

**Article 9 of the EFCA Statement of Faith**

We believe in the personal, bodily and glorious return of our Lord Jesus Christ. The coming of Christ, at a time known only to God, demands constant expectancy and, as our blessed hope, motivates the believer to godly living, sacrificial service and energetic mission.

 What we believe MUST shape how we live. The return of Christ has dramatic implications for our lives. It should urge us to godly living, sacrificial service and energetic mission. I have modified these three slightly, but I was inspired by this creed so I wanted to share it.

**Therefore we must commit to:**

* **Joyful Worship** - honoring our God

“While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.” Luke 24:51

The return of Christ is the culmination of **His EXALTATION**. What the disciples glimpsed in the transfiguration was unveiled in the resurrection and ascension and will be fully and finally revealted in Jesus’ return. When we reflect on the return of Christ, our first impulse should be worship - joy-saturated, hope-filled worship. ***Jesus is coming back as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords*** - finally our faith will be sight; finally everyone will see what we see; finally every wrong will be made right, every sad thing will come untrue.

When Jesus ascended into heaven, the disciples rightly responded with worship. Not the subdued, sober chanting of medieval monks - but the exuberant energy of a Passion Conference. Their assignment was to WAIT for the gift of the Holy Spirit. They didn’t know how long it would be. We know now it was 10 days. They stayed in Jerusalem, huddled together in ongoing worship and prayer - celebrating the culmination of their journey with Jesus.

***Imagine what that felt like!*** For three years you follow this rabbi and are mostly confused by His teachings but gradually get the gist that you are preaching a spiritual kingdom and Jesus is the King of it. But then he dies. It seems the Jewish leaders have succeeded in suppressing this as a cult and the Romans are rounding up any other rabble rousers, so you all hide out in fear. And then Jesus appears. At first just to a few but over 40 days he appears to a number of disciples, some repeatedly and sometimes to large groups.

Imagine ***the JOY of seeing Jesus ALIVE!*** Feel the joyful vindication of it - “It’s all true! He really is the Son of God! His death wasn’t for nothing - it was EVERYTHING! Now He has ascended to the Father and the Holy Spirit is coming!”

Our first response when we think of the return of Christ is joyful worship - honoring Jesus as God. Second.

**Therefore we must commit to:**

* **Uncompromising Holiness** - preparing to be with our Bridegroom

“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.” 1 Thes. 4:17

The picture in 1 Thessalonians 4 is of **a bridal party** going out to meet the Groom. This was the tradition in those days - the Groom would be away for a period of time and the bride would wait and prepare, attended by her young friends. These girls would keep watch for the Groom’s arrival, trying to stay watchful and awake so as soon as they saw him coming they could race out together to join him for the wedding feast. Obviously you didn’t want to miss this moment because then you would miss the party!

It’s a call to ***READINESS***. And as a BRIDE, ***it’s a call to PURITY***. Can you imagine a young girl, waiting for her betrothed, but running around and kissing all the other neighborhood boys? No! She would save herself exclusively and completely for her bridegroom! She would protect her holiness and be prepared for him alone!

Do we take that approach to our holiness? Do we guard our hearts and minds? Do we protect our eyes and our lives from impurity, from idolatry? Anything we love more than Jesus becomes an idol to us - it pollutes us.

The return of Christ is a strong motivation for us to **fight for holiness**. Stand firm. Be strong. Do not give in. Do not give up. He is coming soon! It will all be worth it!

One more exhortation - we must commit to joyful worship, uncompromising holiness and finally:

**Therefore we must commit to:**

* **Bold Mission** - working for our Master

“Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household…? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes.” Matthew 24:45-46

**Matthew 24** begins with signs of the end of the world and ends with this parable about a master who gave his servant a clear assignment. He said, “Take care of my household while I am away. I’ll be gone for a while and I don’t know when I’ll be back but when I do come back it will be sudden and surprising, so I need you to keep working. I need you to take care of my household. Manage it. Give everyone their food. Share the work. Oversee things. Don’t get selfish and lazy and keep all the food for yourself and abuse the household servants. I will catch you and punish you when I get back.”

**Our Master has given us clear instructions** - to love one another, caring for the household of God, and to make disciples of all nations. If Jesus came back today, would He commend you for how faithfully you are working at those two tasks? Are you consistently caring for the people of God? Are you actively working to make disciples and reach the nations?

***All of us WILL give an account to our Master*** when He returns. May He not find any of us sleeping and wasting our lives. Instead, may He find us faithfully working.

**David Brainerd** did not live a long life, but - like Jim Elliot - his short life inspired many to holiness and mission. Brainerd was a teenager during the first Great Awakening, moved by the ministries of George Whitefild and Jonathan Edwards. Kicked out of Yale Divinity school for a disrespectful comment, Brainerd was not qualified to become a preacher, so he was sent as a missionary to the “Indians.” He spent three years in different places, with three different tribes - which meant learning different dialects while enduring all the challenges of a rugged, mostly outdoor life. And all of this while battling tuberculosis. But he would not be enticed, once he was noticed as successful in his mission work, to take a more comfortable preaching post:

“I could have no freedom in the thought of any other circumstances or business in life: All my desire was the conversion of the heathen, and all my hope was in God: God does not suffer me to please or comfort myself with hopes of seeing friends, returning to my dear acquaintance, and enjoying worldly comforts.” David Brainerd

Brainerd devoted his life - really he sacrificed his life - to save as many native american as he could. In three years he preached to and taught several hundred. But his real legacy has been in the simple legacy of his obedience. **He worked to please His master**. He was faithful to the work - through all kinds of challenges and obstacles. In the face of debilitating depression and agonizing illness. Persevering through rejection and opposition from religious leaders, enduring the difficulties of engaging with people of a foreign culture, and the loneliness of the work.

But he was faithful. ***May we do the same!*** As we reflect on the personal, glorious, victorious return of Christ may it motivate us to joyful worship, uncompromising holiness and bold mission!

Let’s pray.