

HERE WE STAND, Part 4
OUR 'BLESSED HOPE': JESUS IS COMING

Before we begin this morning, I want to remind you why it is so important for Christians to take a stand for fundamental truths of our faith. Modern society has abandoned absolute truth. Imagine four hikers in a mountainous wilderness; all four were given a compass, but they're all different. Where true 'North' is, one compass reads "N," one "S," one "W," and one "E." No one knows which direction to go. Each one thinks they are right, and the others are wrong. The result? They devolve into violence, and ultimately anarchy.

This is when where we stand is so critical. Imagine another scene: Young people are tubing on a river, when they hear the roar of a waterfall ahead. They start trying to pull each other to safety, but because they're all in the water, nothing they do helps. Then up ahead, a person is standing on a rock on the shore. As they float by, he throws them a rope and pulls them to safety. In a world headed for the precipice of death and hell, where we stand matters. If we're drifting along with society, we can't help others to safety. If we are standing on the Rock (cf. Mt. 7.24-27), we can. That is why it is so critical for Christians today to take our stand on the Bible as God's Word, to read it, know it, and be ready to share its good news of God's free gift of eternal life with those who, as Paul wrote, are "without hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2.12b).

I want to begin by directing your attention to three NT Scriptures that highlight the future hope of all believers.

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds. (Titus 2.11-14)

We were given this hope when we were saved. (If we already have something, we don't need to hope for it. But if we look forward to something we don't yet have, we must wait patiently and confidently.) (Romans 8.24-25, NLT)

This hope is a strong and trustworthy anchor for our souls. (Hebrews 6.19a)

In 1983, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who spent years in Soviet prisons and exposed the inhumanity of communism in his epic *The Gulag Archipelago*, was awarded the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion. At the award presentation, he began his speech with these profound words: "More than half a century ago, while I was still a child, I recall hearing a number of older people offer the following explanation for the great disasters that had befallen Russia: 'Men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened.'"

If I tried to distill the cause of problems plaguing the U.S. today down to their essence, I would be hard-pressed to do any better than to simply echo Solzhenitsyn's words: *Men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened.*

But there is a deeper question we must answer: What caused the people of Russia to forget God, and what has allowed the same thing to happen in America today? This isn't the place for an in-depth history lesson, but what we know is this: The spiritual vitality of the orthodox church had faded in the last years of the czars. Instead of biblical teaching, the church focused on social and political connections. Those leading the church professed belief in God, but their god was 'dead.' It was tired religion. Its vitality was gone.

In 1917 communists took power, and in less than a year they had seized all church lands and were taking control of the church itself. There were 50,000 churches in Russia when communists came to power; 20 years later only about 200 were left. Men forgot God – replaced Him with culturally-acceptable traditions, and in the end, they were easy prey for a system of government that actively opposed God.

What of the church in America today? As we have seen in recent weeks, the decline in our society parallels a failure of the church to stand for truth. It is no surprise when those *outside* the church disregard the Bible and go against what it says, but tragically, in recent years we have seen many *within* the church forsaking the Bible as God's Word and abandoning its teachings. Scriptural morals are called outmoded. The creation account is called a myth. The church capitulates to culturally popular views. Worst, the gospel itself is distorted. The vitality of the church is gone.

Can we rediscover our spiritual energy and vitality today? I submit to you that if we are going to provide hope for our world in these last days, we must *take a stand*. So far this month we have declared three truths which undergird faith:

First, *the Bible is God's Word*, a source of absolute truth in a relativistic world. Second, *we believe what the Bible says* – about the past, the future, and today. Third, we proclaim that *eternal life is a free gift*, received through faith in Jesus Christ. Today we make a fourth declaration: *We have a 'blessed hope': Jesus is coming again.*

Everyone knows prophecy is in the Bible. It permeates the Old Testament. It radiates from almost every page of the New Testament. The Bible concludes with Revelation, an entire book devoted to prophecy. Why did God give us so much prophecy in the Bible? In case you're wondering, it *wasn't* so Christians would have something to argue about!

When I was a young boy, I had bad days. I got a bad grade, or missed out on dessert, or got a spanking. Sometimes I felt like there wasn't any joy in my life. But I had a way to make myself feel better: I'd go down to the basement alone, and through my tears I'd say, *'Christmas is coming! Christmas is coming!'* You see, Christmas was the happiest time for me, so just reminding myself it was coming cheered me up.

That's why God recorded prophecy in the Bible. When this world gets us down, and the effects of sin are closing in on us, Christians can always say, *Jesus is coming! Jesus is coming!* Bible prophecy can restore our joy and vitality.

To give you a glimpse of the importance of prophecy is for Christians, let me briefly draw your attention to two New Testament passages.

1 Corinthians 15.16-19

1 Cor. 15 is the great resurrection chapter in the Bible. Some Christians in Corinth had begun to doubt that they would be resurrected – that this life was all there is. Paul declares that Jesus rose from the dead, and that all who believe in Jesus as Savior will also one day rise from the dead. Then he tells us why this is so important:

If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless and you are still guilty of your sins. In that case, all who have died believing in Christ are lost! And if our hope in Christ is only for this life, we are more to be pitied than anyone in the world. But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead. He is the first of a great harvest of all who have died. (1 Cor. 15.16-19, NLT)

Paul's point is simple: If there is no resurrection, there's no future hope for us. We have faith in Christ in this life, but that's it. This is a pitiable condition – we had a taste of hope when there wasn't any. But wait! Jesus did rise from the dead, and because we have believed in Him, so will we. Prophecy of resurrection gives us hope in a dead-end life.

Hebrews 11:13-16

Hebrews 11 is the 'Hall of Faith' – the list of great men and women of faith in the Old Testament. They looked forward to the day of the coming Messiah, but never saw it. They all died before Jesus came. But the *promise* of His coming carried them through times of great suffering. Listen:

All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a

distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them. (Hebrews 11.13-16)

What gave men and women throughout OT history strength to stand firm in the face of rejection from their own people, even imprisonment or martyrdom? Their eyes were focused on God's promises not in this life, but in the life to come!

Five years ago, Islamic terrorists killed 21 Christian men on a beach in Libya. With their dying breaths, the men shouted 'Isa!' (Jesus). When asked why these men had such strong faith, a Coptic church leader said, "It's not the end of the road because there is a resurrection that comes after the cross and the empty tomb. And so it is *in that hope* that we continue to live." (Archbishop Angaelos)

Hope. When the evening news depresses you, when violence and anarchy lead to despair, when truth is under attack, what does God offer? Hope! Believers look for Jesus coming to take us to be with Himself, then for His return to reign in the Millennial Kingdom on earth, and finally to the creation of a new heavens and a new earth, where all suffering, sin, pain, and death are gone. This is the 'blessed hope' we read about a few minutes ago. And we take our stand on it.

But amazingly, while more than a quarter of the Bible is prophecy, it's rarely taught in churches today. Why not?

The most common reason is that pastors don't believe Bible prophecy any more. Some simply don't believe the Bible at all; others interpret prophecy figuratively.

Another reason prophecy isn't taught today is that parts of it are hard to understand. This is true. Bible prophecy can be confusing at times. But there are many times when it is clear as a bell. There are many difficult truths in the Bible, but we don't stop teaching them, we just pray and study more.

A third reason prophecy isn't taught today is that pastors are afraid people will disagree with them. No pastor wants to be told he's wrong! But while we won't agree on everything, we can agree on the major truths.

Finally, some Christians avoid prophecy because of bizarre teachings by some 'prophecy freaks' who pretend to know when Jesus will return, or who Antichrist is. I don't want to get lumped in with them either. But don't throw out the baby with the bathwater! Hold onto God's promises!

This month, I have focused on non-negotiables of Christian faith without which we have nothing to offer a world that is searching for meaning. We take our stand first on the Bible as God's Word. Second, we believe what the Bible teaches. Thirdly, we proclaim the good news of forgiveness of sins and eternal life as a free gift to all who believe in Jesus. And this morning, we declare that in a hopeless world, God has a message of hope: *Jesus is coming again!*

Why do we take our stand on Bible prophecy about the soon return of Jesus? Why do we teach it? Why is prophecy so important?

First, because prophecies of Jesus first coming were fulfilled literally. OT prophecies that Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, born of a virgin, that He would come from the tribe of Judah, in the line of king David, were all fulfilled. In all, over 40 prophecies of Jesus' first coming were fulfilled to the letter. Since biblical prophecies of Jesus' first coming were fulfilled literally, we believe prophecies of His second coming will be, too.

Second, we declare that Jesus is coming so that those who are not ready for that day will consider the claims of Christ. Biblical prophecies that point to Christ's return may lead to some trusting in Him as Savior. Why wouldn't we tell this good news – and offer this hope, to everyone?

Thirdly, we declare that Jesus is coming again because this motivates us to live our lives for Christ today. If you believe in Jesus as your personal Savior, you know that He gave His life on the cross to pay for your sin. Now fast forward to the day Jesus returns. The Bible says that on that day, we will all give an account of ourselves (Rom. 14.12) – not to see if we get into heaven or not, but for heavenly rewards. On that day, we'd trade every pursuit and pleasure in this life to hear the words "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25.23). Remembering Jesus is coming causes us to live our lives for Him.

In Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, he announces the future coming of the Lord: *The Lord Himself will descend*

from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. . .

For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night... But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief, for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night or of darkness; so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober. (1 Thessalonians 4.16-17; 5.2, 4-6)

Prophecy in the Bible points to the return of Christ. It is God's promise of a coming day when all evil and sin, war and pain, sickness and death will be over forever. This is our 'blessed hope.' This morning, we take our stand on that hope. In a world that has lost its hope, believe it, rejoice in it, and proclaim it.