

## **Imminent!**

We are beginning a new sermon series today. For the next few Sundays we are going to be examining what we call the blessed hope, the rapture of the church. In case you didn't know, in the Assemblies of God we have a core set of beliefs or doctrines referred to as the Sixteen Fundamental Truths. One of those fundamental truths is a belief in the rapture of the church. It's stated like this: **“The resurrection of those who have fallen asleep in Christ and their translation together with those who are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord is the imminent and blessed hope of the Church.”**

Notice that word imminent. **Imminent = “Appearing as if about to happen; likely to happen without delay; impending.”** Imminent. Likely to happen without delay. I think one of the consequences of the covid pandemic has been to cause believers in Jesus to heighten our awareness of the imminent return of the Lord. Many of the things happening in our culture and our world right now seem to fit into what has been our scenario for events leading up to the rapture. Is this the final run-up to the rapture of the church?

If you've lived as long as I have, you know this isn't the first time world events have pointed to the Lord's return. The fact is, each generation could point to events and scenarios that indicated the Lord's return was at hand. From first century Christians in persecution to those living through WWII, the birth of the nation of Israel to the events of today, it certainly looked like/looks like the Lord's return was/is at hand. Then, now, are we living in the last days?

What does the bible say? Here is what the Apostle John says, **“Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come.” 1 John 2:18.** Writing in the first century, John and the other apostles believed they were living in the last days, in the last hours. The truth is, we have been living in the last days since Acts 2. On the day of Pentecost, Peter spoke of what was happening and said, **“This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel; ‘In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people’...” Acts 2:17** If anyone wonders, are we living in the last days, the answer is yes we are. But we don't say that because of covid or vaccine passports or the potential for a computer chip to be implanted in us, we say we are living in the last days because the bible says so. We have been living in the last days for 2,000 years. So what does that mean for us, today? I think it means we are closer than ever to the coming of the Lord. As Bro. McQueen used to say, **“It's later than it's ever been.”**

The Apostle Paul writes, **“But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.”** **Philippians 3:20-21**

John says we are living in the last days, the last hours. Paul says we eagerly await our Savior, who is coming from heaven to catch us away, awaiting that moment when these mortal bodies at the rapture will be transformed into glorious bodies like his that will never grow old or wear out. We live in anticipation of his imminent return. It could be today.

Why do we believe this? What else does the bible say? Jesus said, **“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.”** **John 14:1-3** Jesus said he was going to come back and take us to be with him. I think we can rely on Jesus to carry out his promises, don’t you?

As the disciples stood watching Jesus ascend into heaven, two angels appeared and told them, **“This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”** **Acts 1:11.** They saw Jesus taken up into the clouds and he will come again in the clouds, in the air, coming for his church. When? No time frame was given, but the disciples lived in expectation of his return! It was imminent!

Why do we believe it? Paul writes, **“According to the Lord’s own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, and 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 encourage each other with these words.”** **1 Thessalonians 4:15-18** Notice Paul says “we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord.” Paul expected the Lord’s imminent return in his lifetime. How much closer must we be?

Jesus said he would prepare a place and come again. The angels said he would return in the same manner. The Apostles said he was coming again and they lived in the eager anticipation

of his return. They believed his return was imminent! Likely to happen any day, any time! The New Testament writers believed in the imminent return of the Lord and it affected everything they did, every choice they made. It should affect and direct how we live as well. Remember Jesus said when you see these signs that point to his return, don't hide, don't hunker down, lift up your heads. Your redemption is drawing nigh.

In what ways does the imminent return of the Lord affect us? Years ago I heard Dr. George Wood speak at a conference and he said the New Testament passages that address the Lord's imminent return fall into one of five themes. Specifically he said, **“The hope of our Lord's imminent return, 1) provides a powerful incentive for righteousness in our daily life; 2) galvanizes us to risk greatly for the King and His Kingdom; 3) steadies our resolve to endure to the end; 4) fills us with the anticipation of reward; 5) makes us long for reunion with him, whom we serve and love.”**

Let's look at that first statement. Let's just say it this way, **The hope of our Lord's imminent return provides a powerful incentive for right living in our daily life.** The Lord is coming, big deal. What difference does it make? Why does it matter? Peter talks about the coming of the Lord, about how we should live in the last days. We don't have time to explore all of this passage, but Peter points out that this world is decaying, that it will eventually be destroyed, but he says we are looking forward not to the promise of destruction but to the promise of a new heavens and a new earth. We are looking forward to redemption and renewal of all things, our physical bodies and this planet included. In light of the Lord's return, in light of coming destruction and judgment, **“What kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming... make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.” 2 Peter 3:11-14**

The Lord is coming, his return is imminent, so what kind of people ought you to be? What kind of life should we be living? Peter says we are to be living a holy life, that means a life separated to God and separated from sin and conformity to the world's pattern and lifestyle. We need to be living for Jesus, living holy and godly lives. We are to be imitators of Christ, living not only for him, but living like him. We are to make every effort to be found spotless and blameless and at peace with the Lord. Live without a spot of sin in your life, live without a stain of sin on your life. Blameless before him. Jesus is coming, how are you living?

Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians about the coming of the Lord. In chapter 3 he states, **“May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.” 1 Thessalonians 3:13** Here it is again, blameless and holy. He is talking about how we should be living in the light of the Lord’s return. Jesus is coming. His return is imminent, any time. How should you be living? Blameless, not engaged in compromise and sin. Holy, separated to God and separated from the ways of the world.

Paul continues in the next verse, **“Finally brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God...now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more.”** Specifically, he tells them **“It is God’s will that you should be sanctified; that you should avoid sexual immorality, that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen who do not know God...for God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit.” 1**

#### **Thessalonians 4:3-8**

Paul is warning the church then and us today that we need to live a holy life because the Lord’s return is imminent. God called us to holiness, including sexual purity. I’m sorry it doesn’t fit with how you want to live, but this isn’t my opinion, you aren’t rejecting what a preacher says, you are rejecting what God says. If you are a believer and you are committing sexual sin, he says you are rejecting God and by living in an unholy fashion you are grieving and rejecting the Holy Spirit of God. Jesus is coming and you are rejecting God and living like a heathen who doesn’t know God. Is that plain enough? You aren’t ready for his imminent return, you aren’t living spotless and blameless before him, with sins forgiven. It’s time to get ready.

John writes, **“And now, dear children, continue in him so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming.” 1 John 2:28** Some are going to be ashamed when he returns! Not looking to meet him but wanting to hide from him. Live for him so you can be confident and unashamed at his coming. Speaking of the Lord’s return John adds, **“Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as He is pure.” 1 John 3:3.** The Lord’s imminent return should motivate us to get clean, live clean and stay clean.

In 1 Thessalonians 5 Paul speaks of the coming of the Lord as coming like a thief in the night, unexpected, like labor pains that come suddenly upon a pregnant woman. Pregnant

women know what's coming, they just don't know exactly when it will come. We know the Lord is coming, we just don't know exactly when he is coming, and Paul indicates sometimes we get lazy, we fall asleep instead of remaining watchful, vigilant. He writes, **“But you brothers are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day...so then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled.” 1 Thessalonians 5:4-6**

Paul and Peter both warn us about falling asleep, about no longer living in light of his coming. Peter says the Lord has delayed his return because he is not willing that any should perish, but in the process, many have fallen asleep or stopped believing in his return. People argue, **“Where is this ‘coming’ he promised? Ever since our father’s died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.” 2 Peter 3:4** People argue, “God doesn’t intervene in the course of history. Nothing has changed. Jesus isn’t coming.” Peter says, **“But they deliberately forget...”** People forget God has been in control, that he did destroy the earth once in the flood, that he is still in control now and he will bring this all to an end someday.

I have to bring this to a close. Are we deliberately forgetting or ignoring the reality that Jesus is coming again, that his return is imminent, and that he is coming for a church that is blameless, spotless, whose sins are forgiven and who are living holy lives? Are you ignoring the facts? How many Scriptures have I shared this morning? The bible warns us again and again of his coming. Think again about Peter’s question, in light of the fact that all of this earth will pass away, in light of the fact that Jesus is coming, “what kind of people ought you to be?” How should you be living in light of the imminent return of Jesus?

If Jesus were to come this moment, are you ready to meet him? Would you be ashamed, wanting to run and hide? Is there sin you need to confess and turn away from to prepare to meet him? Are there relationships you need to repair? Is there something standing between you and Jesus? His return is imminent. Maybe he isn’t coming for the church just yet, but I’ve preached 20 funerals so far this year. His coming for you may be imminent. How should you be living? What kind of person ought you to be in light of his imminent return?