

SERIES: This We Believe

SERMON: **I Believe in the Future**

SCRIPTURE: Revelation 20:1-15, 2 Thessalonians 1:6-12

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Today we come to the last in a series of eight messages on the major doctrines of the Christian Faith, based loosely upon the new Statement of Faith of the EFCA. Actually there is one more message that has to do with Article 8, but I'm going to save it for June 15 during our new series on the Book of James, because it fits so beautifully with the text for that day, James 1:19-27.

There is perhaps no time in human history when societal change has come upon us so quickly and technical advancements so close together. The modern person can only dream about what life might be like on earth at the end of the 21st century, if we even reach that point.

But we live at a time that is both exciting and fearful. Our dreams for the future contain a variety of nightmares. The societal advancements which promise great good have also brought us more sophisticated crime, greater access to sinful behavior and more leisure time to indulge in it, the loss of personal rights and privacy, and more efficient ways of killing our enemies. In light of such a scenario, what hope can human society truly have for the future? Listen as I read Articles 9 and 10 of the proposed new Statement of Faith for the Free Church:

*Christ's Return*

*We believe in the personal, bodily and premillennial 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.*

*Response and Eternal Destiny*

*We believe that God commands everyone everywhere to believe the gospel by turning to Him in repentance and receiving the Lord Jesus Christ. We believe that God will raise the dead bodily and judge the world, assigning the unbeliever to condemnation and eternal conscious punishment and the believer to eternal blessedness and joy with the Lord in the new heaven and the new earth, to the praise of His glorious grace. Amen.*

These statements address an area of doctrine known as eschatology, the doctrine of last things, a critical and rewarding area of theology. As we approach this topic, I suggest there are two mistakes we need to work hard to avoid. One is what we might call eschatomania (not a real word, but it should work), which I would define as preoccupation, even obsession, with studying prophetic events, making adherence to detailed prophetic schemes the litmus test for orthodoxy. But we must also avoid eschatophobia, which is the fear of prophecy, the view that any attention given to the end times is automatically radical, sensational, and unnecessarily divisive.

It has been said that over one-third of the Bible was prophetic when it was written, and over one-fourth of it still is, so we simply cannot ignore it. While there are certainly dangers in an overemphasis on the future, there is also a blessing promised from the study of prophecy. Revelation 1:3 reads, "Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near."

But there are tremendous differences of opinion as to what the Bible teaches about prophetic events, even among those who are passionate for Christ, passionate about the authority of Scripture, and passionate for the lost. By its very nature prophetic truth is difficult to interpret, and this should make us humble and cautious about excessive dogmatism. Consider this fact: There were literally hundreds of prophecies in the OT concerning the first coming of Christ (some involving minute detail, such as Micah 5:2), and many Jewish scholars specialized in those prophetic passages, yet almost no one was expecting Jesus when He arrived—in fact, only his mother, Joseph, one old prophet named Simeon, one old prophetess named Anna, some shepherds, and a few magi. The same will be true, apparently, at Jesus' Second Coming. Despite many detailed prophecies, despite many visible signs of the times, and despite scholars who specialize in such matters, the vast majority of believers will be taken by surprise, including the experts.

I want to begin with what I believe is the single most important concept for us to grasp when it comes to prophecy:

### **The Kingdom of God**

I believe it is best understood as “the rule of God in the lives of individuals (and the world as a whole) so as to finally make all things right and bring everything in line with His character.” The need for this to happen should be obvious. Human beings are sinful and have fallen out of line with the character of God. After placing a curse on a fallen world, God promised Adam and Eve that one of her offspring would rise up and crush Satan and destroy his power.

The rest of the Old Testament expresses the hope for a Savior who would come and establish the Kingdom of God on earth. Isaiah prophesied that there would be healing and peace in human society and even in nature itself. The lion would lie down with the lamb and weapons would be beaten into plowshares. Jeremiah looked forward to a time when God would write His law on the hearts of His people and forgive them once and for all of their sin.

In the New Testament we read that the long awaited Savior has arrived. In His virgin birth and sinless life He fulfilled numerous amazing prophecies concerning His coming. In His ministry He traveled around preaching the Kingdom of God, announcing that His Kingdom was at hand and that people could enter it now. He claimed that since He cast out demons by the power of God the Kingdom of God was in their midst.

But to the Jewish observer, something was missing. Where were the earthly and socio-political signs of the kingdom? The Romans still ruled, injustices prevailed, and the chosen people of God were still being persecuted. These observations were not lost on Jesus. He confirmed that while the kingdom had in some sense arrived, it was also in some sense still future. He urged His disciples to pray for the Kingdom to come in its fullness and He promised them that He would return one day to establish His Kingdom in power and glory.

And so what we have is a Kingdom which is both here and not here, both now and not yet. It is here because Christ has conquered Satan, sin has been forgiven, and we have peace with God. It is still distant because Satan is not finally vanquished and human society in general has still not accepted the rule of God.

This tension between the here and the not yet aspects of the Kingdom is crucial for us to grasp. Religious liberals have too often thought only of the here and now, seeing it as their responsibility to bring in the kingdom and, through government and social programs, establish peace and prosperity in the here and now. In fact, they aren't even sure there *is* a future kingdom. On the other hand, religious conservatives have too often thought only of the future kingdom, being willing to let this world go to hell in a handbasket, because after all, "this world is not my home." They say, why should we worry about environmentalism and global warming and third world countries; it's all going up in smoke some day anyway! But biblical Christians should be just as concerned about now as then, because the Kingdom of God is both here and it is coming!

For the rest of our time this morning we want to examine how it is that God plans to bring His Kingdom, already inaugurated by Christ, to its fulfillment in the consummation of human history. To do this I have chosen to start with the three basic ways in which Christians have understood the scope of human history in regard to the Millennium.

### **The Millennium**

The Millennium is, of course, a term which means 1000 years and refers specifically to a passage in Revelation 20, which speaks of a 1000 year period of peaceful and righteous rule by Christ, during which time Satan is incarcerated and not allowed to oppose God's work or His people. Turn with me to Revelation 20:1-6. As we read this passage, I want you to note that there is a parenthetical thought in verse 5. This has created no end of difficulty when it is not recognized as a parenthesis, so I am just going to move it to the end of our passage.

*And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient servant, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time.*

*I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to live and reigned with Christ a thousand years. . . . This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years. Parenthesis: (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.)*

So very much of one's prophetic view depends on how this one Bible passage is taken. Some see it as merely symbolic of the triumph of good over evil, while others take it as describing a literal reign of Christ on the this earth. There are actually three primary views:

**1. Postmillennialism.** The word means "after the millennium," signifying that the Second Coming occurs after the Church has established the millennium. The 1000 year reign of Rev. 20 is taken symbolically to describe the peace and harmony that is gradually being produced as the Gospel is preached to all the world. Hearts are being changed, societies and cultures are gradually adopting biblical standards, and when the Kingdom is fully realized, Jesus will return.

Perhaps you hadn't noticed how peaceful and harmonious the world was becoming or how much our culture is adopting biblical standards! As a matter of fact, this view, quite popular early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, almost died out with two minor events called World War I and World War II. People have short memories, however, and today postmillennialism is experiencing something of a revival.

**2. Amillennialism** literally means "no millennium." More accurately its adherents believe will be no *earthly* reign of Christ following His Second Coming. The amillennialist believes that the millennium is a spiritual reality which exists currently in the hearts of believers as Christ rules there, or that the millennium is the present state of the righteous in Heaven. All the Old Testament promises to Israel about a coming kingdom are being fulfilled spiritually in the church. The fact that Israel has been re-established as a nation is an historical accident without prophetic significance. By the way, amillennialism is by far the majority view in Christendom today. It is the official position of the Catholic Church, Lutherans, Methodists, most Presbyterians, Anglicans, Orthodox, etc.

**3. Premillennialism** is the view that the Second Coming will occur before the millennium. The 1000 year period in Revelation 20 is an actual reign of Christ on earth. The earth will experience the benevolent rule of Christ and the absence of Satanic influence until the very end of this extended period, when Satan will be released for one last fling, then cast forever into the Lake of Fire.

Premillennialism is the official position of the Evangelical Free Church of America, but it is important to note that there are various options within premillennialism. There is dispensational premillennialism, progressive dispensational premillennialism, and historic premillennialism, and all of these views are represented in the Free Church. I don't think you really want me to explain these variations, and I couldn't do it anyway in the time I have this morning. I personally do not believe one's millennial view is an issue over which we should break fellowship, but premillennialism is the only one of the three views that takes Revelation 20 literally and sees prophetic significance in the re-gathering of Israel.

Now we need to take a look at various other components of this scenario picturing the end of human history. Let's consider one whose importance in Scripture is unquestioned:

## The second coming of Christ

All but four New Testament books address it. Over 300 verses discuss it. It is mentioned twice as many times as the atonement and eight times as often as Christ's first coming. In many respects it is the focal point of human history. I want you to look with me at a selection of verses from Jesus' Olivet discourse in Matthew 24 and 25 where Jesus teaches about His second coming and the events which lead up to it. This is Mt. 24:30.

*At that time (He has just talked about the signs of the times) the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.*

*(Skip to vs. 36). No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be the coming of the Son of Man.*

*(Skip to vs. 42). Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.*

From this passage we understand a number of things about the second coming of Christ. First, it will be personal. This is no prophecy of the spiritual presence of Christ as we see in other places, but of His personal, physical presence. As the angels told the disciples in Acts 1, Christ will return to earth in the same way in which they saw him depart. Second, it will be unexpected and sudden. Jesus tells us that it will be as in the time of Noah. People will be going about their daily business as if God didn't matter, and then, at a time no man knows, the end will come upon them suddenly like lightning. Third, it will be visible to all the world. All the nations of the earth will see the Son of Man coming, even the dead, for we are told in Revelation that even those who crucified Him will see Him coming.

It will also be glorious. John tells us that He will come as one riding a great white horse with an innumerable army behind Him and on His thigh will be written "King of Kings and Lord of Lords." In His first coming, He appeared in meekness—just to His parents and to a few unsuspecting shepherds. When He comes again, He will appear in inconceivable power and glory. Whereas at His first coming the reception of His rule was voluntary, and often rejected, at His second coming it will no longer be a matter of choice. Every knee will bow to Him, as Philippians 2 promises.

Finally, the Second Coming will have two major purposes. First, it will initiate a time of judgment. Why will the nations will mourn at His coming? Because they will instantly know that they are about to face the God of the universe against whom they have rebelled. Second, it will be a time of blessing when Christ reclaims His own. It will be the fulfillment of His promise to return so that where He is, there we may be also (John 14). This dual purpose is even more clearly seen in 2 Thes 1:6-10:

*God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to*

*you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.*

But now we must move quickly to at least touch upon other subsidiary events accompanying the Second Coming. Both Old and New Testament authors describe a time of great tribulation which will immediately precede the Second Coming (so we're working backward time-wise from the Millennium to the Second Coming to the Tribulation).

### **The Great Tribulation**

**Its nature:** It will be a period of persecution and affliction, focused on Israel but affecting the whole world, such as has never seen before on earth. Listen to this description of it by New Testament theologian George Eldon Ladd:

*The manifestations of evil which have marked human history will at the end of the age be concentrated in one final incarnation of evil, a "super-man," the Antichrist, who will exercise a world-wide rule, deify the state and achieve a union of church and state so that men will be forced to worship him or suffer economic sanctions and death. Antichrist, energized by satanic powers, will especially direct his hostility against God and the people of God. During his ascendancy, there will befall God's people the most fearful persecution history has witnessed. This time of suffering is called the "Great Tribulation," and will be of three and a half years duration. However, God will not be inactive, and during the final period of the Tribulation, God will manifest impending judgment by the outpouring of divine wrath upon the Antichrist and those who worship him.*

**Its instigator:** The Anti-Christ. Someone just last Sunday asked me, "Do you think one of our presidential candidates this year is the Anti-Christ." My response was, "No, I doubt if she is." It turned out that's not what they meant. Maybe they were disgruntled conservatives and thought McCain fit the bill, I don't know. Actually, this future world leader is no one to laugh about, but frankly I have no idea whether he/she is someone on the world stage today.

**Its length.** Ladd spoke of 3½ years as the time of the Great Tribulation, but the entire period is actually a week of years or seven years. Jesus tells us, however, that "If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened" (Matt. 24:22).

**Its consummation** occurs at the Battle of Armageddon, through which Christ will destroy His enemies and preserve His people.

## **The rapture of the Church**

The rapture is the gathering by Christ of believers, living and dead, as spoken of in 2 Thes 4:17: “we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them (the dead in Christ) in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.” The principal issue of debate is the timing of the Rapture relative to the Tribulation. Will it occur before, in the middle of, toward the end of, or after the tribulation?<sup>i</sup>

These four views of the time of the rapture are generally known by the following names:

**Pre-tribulation rapture**

**Mid-tribulation rapture**

**Pre-wrath rapture**

**Post-tribulation rapture<sup>ii</sup>**

All of these views are represented in the Free Church; in fact, all of them are held by serious Bible students in this church. Thankfully, our Statement of Faith does not stake out a position on the time of the rapture.

I would not presume to be dogmatic on any of the rapture positions, because frankly I don’t think the Scriptures are entirely clear on the topic. I personally think the views with the fewest problems are the pre-wrath rapture and the post-trib rapture. It’s not that I like the idea of going through the Tribulation period, because I don’t. But God has historically often allowed His righteous people to go through great trials. And Jesus specifically promised that the church would undergo serious persecution because of His name. He prayed in John 17 not that God would take the church out of the world to avoid persecution, but that He would protect the church in the midst of persecution and tribulation. In light of this biblical norm, the church, in my view, would be wise to be prepared to face any tribulation, perhaps even the Great Tribulation, ready to endure to the very end for the glory of Christ.

Now, having moved backwards from the Millennium to the Second Coming to the tribulation and the rapture of the Church, I want us to return to the very end and think about the final consummation, which includes three components.

### **The final consummation**

**1. The resurrections of the dead.** As we saw in chapter 20 of Revelation, there are two resurrections of the dead. The first is the resurrection of believers, including those martyred during the Tribulation. It occurs at the Second Coming, at the inauguration of the millennium. At this time, believers will be given glorified bodies and will in some way rule with Christ in the millennial era.

The second resurrection is for those who have rejected Christ. It is at the end of the millennium after Satan has been finally destroyed.

**2. The judgments** of God upon all who have ever lived—believers and unbelievers.

Second Corinthians 5:10 speaks of the judgment seat of Christ for believers (“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.”). I believe this judgment takes place at the Second Coming.

Revelation 20 speaks of the Great White Throne judgment for unbelievers that takes place at the end of the Millennium. Rev. 20:11-15:

*Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done and recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life he was thrown into the lake of fire.*

The determination as to which of these two judgments any individual faces depends upon belief in or rejection of Christ. But the degree of judgment appears to be the same for both believers and unbelievers—it is their works. A believer’s works determines his or her degree of reward in heaven, and the unbeliever’s works determines his or her degree of punishment in hell.

**3. The eternal state.** There are, of course, radically different eternal destinies for the saved and the unsaved. For believers the scene is a glorious one. Look again at the words of John’s Revelation, chapter 21:1:

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”*

*He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!”*

*(22:3) No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.*

In regard to the unsaved, we have read of the lake of fire. But the most terrifying description of hell is how Paul describes it in 2 Thes. 1:9: “shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power.” No amount of physical torture could come close to the agony of living in lonely separation from God forever.

**Conclusion:** Well, there you have it. The history of the world with a view towards coming attractions, in about 40 minutes! Sorry I had to leave out the discussion of a few details, like whether there will be mosquitoes or Bermuda grass in the millennium. But I imagine we can live without that information for now. These truths we have surveyed today are important, even monumental, for they tell us the end of history, or *His story*, ahead of time.

But I have one more question, “What difference should these future events make in our lives today?” Let me suggest just three ways they should make a difference. First, the expectation of Christ's return should bring us comfort. After relating to the Thessalonian church some of the issues we have discussed today, Paul encourages them to “comfort one another with these words.” We live in a world absolutely dominated by sin and destruction. We live in the fear of crime and injustice. We live with the pain of broken families, prodigal children, incurable diseases, growing hostility to God's truth, and the consequences of our own failures. But just as the agony of the disciples at the death of the savior was transformed into joy by the resurrection, so the trials of this life will be transformed by the glorious coming of our Savior to gather us to himself and to a place with no more tears.

Second, the expectation of Christ's return in both glory and judgment must motivate us to a greater purity of life. The aging apostle John told his readers, “Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.” (1 John 3:2-3)

Finally, Christ's return should motivate us to live purposefully so as to glorify Him. I return to 2 Thes 1, where after talking about the Second Coming of Christ, Paul says,

*“With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith. We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you ,and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.”*

You see, this ultimately must be our major concern in the doctrine of eschatology. It's not about fascination with signs of the end of the age such as the re-formation of the nation of Israel or whether the European Common Market is the ten headed beast. It's about how we live now. It's about a Savior who was promised in Genesis and by all the prophets, who threw open the doors of the Kingdom of God, dying on the cross for our sins, and rising from the dead to guarantee that He would come again power to call us to himself. It's about wanting to be able to meet the Savior with confidence and joy, rather than shame when He comes again.

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i. The answer to the question of timing determines whether the rapture is secret and sudden, with millions of people suddenly disappearing from planes, cars, offices, schools and even

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churches, as in the *Left Behind* series. The pre-trib view teaches that; the others do not. Interestingly, the Scripture verse most often used to justify such a secret rapture in Matt. 24:40, 41, and in that passage it comes after the Tribulation at the time of the Second Coming: “Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.”

ii. Here is a somewhat more detailed explanation of these rapture positions:

(1). The pre-tribulation view has been the dominant view among fundamentalists and was fairly popular among evangelicals during much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is the view that Jesus will return for the Church just before the Tribulation, seven years before the Second Coming, when He will set up His Kingdom. Thus the Church will not be affected by the Tribulation. The rapture of the church is considered the Blessed Hope of the believer (Titus 2:13).

(2). The mid-tribulation view has been less common, but is gaining somewhat in popularity. It holds that Christ will return at the middle of the Tribulation when the Antichrist turns on the Jewish people. Thus the rapture is separated from the Second Coming by 3½ years instead of 7.

(3). The post-tribulation view has increased significantly in popularity over the past 30 years. In fact it has increased in almost direct proportion to the decline in popularity of the Scofield Bible, which is pre-trib. This view holds that the Church will go through the Tribulation, and the rapture will follow. The rapture and the Second coming, then, occur at the same time, or one immediately after the other. To the post-trib the Blessed Hope is the Second Coming.

(4). The pre-wrath view is relatively recent (about 20 years) and was developed by Dr. Marv Rosenthal, a Jewish believer and founder of the magazine, *Israel My Glory*. He was fired from the ministry he founded, Friends of Israel, because he changed his view from pre-trib. The thrust of Rosenthal’s position is that the rapture will occur very late in the Tribulation period, just prior to the pouring out of the bowls of wrath, but separate from the Second Coming. Some might call it a late mid-trib view. Rosenthal is actually more effective in critiquing the pre-trib view, in my estimation, than he is in establishing the pre-wrath view.

(5). A fifth view, called the partial rapture view, is that only saints who are worthy will be raptured before the wrath of God is poured out. Those who have not been faithful will remain on earth to endure the Tribulation (Heb. 9:28). There is very little biblical evidence to support this view. The reason it was devised is probably that this is the way most of us would do it if we were God.

A final view that unfortunately many seem to be opting for might be called the pan-tribulation view: “who cares, it’s all going to pan out in the end.” I don’t recommend this view.