

His Glorious Return
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
December 1, 2019



Please read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 before going further in this transcript.

For the past couple of years, the Evangelical Free Church of America (EFCA) has been having a robust dialogue around a particular question. It's a question about the millennium. Millennium simply means 1,000 years. Revelation 20:2 talks about this, "[An angel] seized the dragon, that [ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years." Without getting into too much detail, Jesus will reign as king during these 1,000 years. Some Bible scholars take these 1,000 years literally. Others takes them more figuratively, understanding the millennium to mean a really long time, but not necessarily an exact 1,000 years. Some Bible scholars view the millennium as a key End Times event that is still to come in the future, but others view it as an already occurring event in our present day lives. As you can see, these views are at different ends of the spectrum. And yet, it's worth mentioning that these views actually agree on some very central truths. They agree that Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection is the key to our salvation. They agree that in the end, Jesus will win. And they agree on a lot of other things as well.¹

The EFCA has a 10-point Statement of Faith (SOF). It's the same SOF that shows up in our own church constitution. We call it our "Confession of Faith" so it's a pretty important statement for us to know and understand. Article #9 of this statement, says the following about Christ's return: "We believe in the personal, bodily and premillennial return of our Lord Jesus Christ..." That word "PREmillennial" reveals a key area where Bible scholars disagree on the Millennium. That is, there are 3 main views:

Premillennial: believes that Jesus will return PRE, that is BEFORE the 1,000 years.

Postmillennial: believes that Jesus will return POST, that is AFTER the 1,000 years.

Amillennial: believes that Jesus is CURRENTLY reigning from heaven, that is, the 1,000 years have already begun.²

Now, each of these 3 views has its own merits.³ But each one disagrees with the others on EXACTLY WHEN Jesus will return. More specifically, on the ORDER of events leading up to His return. Many of you will probably be happy to hear, that we are NOT going to spend our time today trying to solve this question.⁴ All that we need to know for today, is that some people are convinced that this particular millennial question is a major concern. While others, see it as only a minor concern. That's why, this past summer, a majority of Efree churches voted in favor of changing Article 9 to now read: "We believe in the personal, bodily and ~~premillennial~~ glorious return of our Lord Jesus Christ..."⁵ (Glorious pulls all 3 views under one umbrella.) In other words, the EFCA has decided that declaring a particular view of the Millennium is no longer necessary in our 10-point SOF. It's not a MAJOR point worth breaking fellowship over. What is major is everything else that is still in the 10-point SOF, including our agreement that Jesus' will indeed return and that His return will be personal, bodily, and GLORIOUS! On this, we enthusiastically and wholeheartedly agree. So we are going to talk about Jesus' Glorious Return today.

¹ In fact, many Bible experts who disagree on the various millennial views agree on everything else in the entire 10-point Statement of Faith. See the full statement and learn more at <https://www.efca.org/resources/document/efca-statement-faith-scripture-references> One of the best ways to learn more about this is to read the book, "Evangelical Convictions," published by Free Church Publications, Minneapolis, MN, 2011. It's easy to search by title and then purchase at www.nsresources.com

² The NIV Study Bible, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 2174 has a helpful footnote on these 3 views. Much greater detail is laid out in the book, *Evangelical Convictions*, Free Church Publications, Minneapolis, MN, 2011, in the chapter that explains Article 9, "Christ's Return." (Still others, hold to what has been called a "Pan-millennial view." That is, it will all "pan out" in the end. 😊)

³ It shouldn't really surprise us that we have such a variety of views here. There is a fairly consistent pattern in the New Testament of God's kingdom being now but not yet; i.e. Christ is reigning now in believers' hearts by faith but He hasn't yet come back to reign on earth in person. This pattern should cause all of us to promote our specific understandings of end times and eschatology with humility. In addition, since Revelation 20:1-7 is the only place in Scripture that clearly mentions a 1,000-year reign, we should be careful just how much emphasis we give to our particular millennial position.

⁴ Some of you may be thinking, "this is all well/good Pastor Jerry, but I'm not interested in a theology class this morning." Well, you should be. There's some really good stuff in theology. And that shouldn't surprise us, because theology is simply the study of God. We do theology every week. But let me also reassure you with this, by the end of this message I'll try to convey some practical and meaningful applications from all of this. So, hang in there with me, and there should be a payoff in the end.

⁵ Learn more at <https://www.efca.org/resources/document/motion-amend-article-9-efca-statement-faith> and other related links.

Jesus' Glorious Return reminds us of 3 things. 1st of all it reminds us that...

1. Jesus is our glorious king. When we worship on Sunday morning, we worship a king.⁶ Yes, Jesus was a baby born in Bethlehem. Yes, He was a Carpenter. Jesus became known as a friend of sinners. Yes, He is our Redeemer and our High Priest.

But Jesus is even more than all of these. Jesus is also our current and soon-coming king. A king who reigns in AWESOME power and glory. In fact, GLORIOUS is a key word for describing Jesus.⁷ **GLORIOUS:** means that Jesus is someone of high renown, honor, splendor, magnificence and great beauty.⁸ Jesus is the glorious Messiah who came to rescue the world from sin. This reality is one of the main reasons why the Jews living in 1st century Palestine, had such a hard time recognizing Him and accepting Him. Jesus came to earth as a humble baby, whose parents had to place Him in a manger. He took on the role of a suffering servant, NOT that of a glorious king. That's why many people missed Him the first time around. That's why some people still miss Him today: they don't understand that Jesus is both a suffering servant AND a glorious king.

When Jesus comes for the second time, our world will experience Him as a glorious king. But in phase 1, Jesus came in humility.⁹ Philippians 2 talks about this, how Jesus' glory was veiled in deep humility. Micah Carpenter will actually share more about this in his sermon next Sunday. Just to be clear, Jesus was a king the whole time. "Even in his earthy life, [Jesus] was a king, but he chose to reign not from a royal throne but from a cross."¹⁰ Jesus impending glorious return reminds us that Jesus is our glorious king. Jesus' Glorious Return also reminds us that...

2. Our salvation will have a glorious finale. If you thought that you were already enjoying all that salvation has to offer, you should know that there is actually more to come! There are 3 dimensions to our salvation. What I mean is that there are past, present, and future aspects to our salvation.¹¹ The 1st dimension of our salvation is...

1) In the past, our salvation was already paid for! This salvation was purchased in the past, at Calvary. Jesus' one-time, once-for-all sacrifice bought our salvation.¹² "We have been justified by God's grace... and we are no longer subject to the penalty of sin."¹³ Once we have placed our faith in Jesus' death/burial/resurrection, it's a done deal.¹⁴ Therefore, there is nothing left to be done in the present or in the future. In other words, in the past, Jesus won our freedom from sin. The 2nd dimension of our salvation is...

2) In the present, our salvation is making a powerful impact! We are now free from sin's control and we can resist temptation. This is a process; a journey whereby we learn to die to ourselves and live for God and His purposes. We are empowered by the Holy Spirit to live a godly life. We are ambassadors for Christ, declaring the Good News of salvation in His name. Our salvation has blessed us to such a degree that we live our lives to be a blessing to the world around us. In everything, we live lives of faith in order to bring God glory. Sharing in this same salvation is what unites us as Brothers and Sisters in Christ. Local churches are simply gathering places for those who are "becoming fully devoted followers of Jesus together." In other words, in the present, our salvation is making a powerful impact in the lives of believers but also in the lives of those with whom they come into contact. The 3rd dimension of our salvation is...

3) In the future, our salvation will have a glorious finale! Let's take a little more time to dig into this one. Hebrews 9:28 says that, "...he (Christ) will appear a second time, *not to bear sin, but to bring salvation* to those who are waiting for him." This sounds a little strange, why would Jesus need to BRING our salvation? Didn't He already win our salvation the 1st time He came? Well, yes, He did.

⁶ The NIV Zondervan Study Bible has a great article titled, "The Kingdom of God," on pages 2662-3 by T. D. Alexander.

⁷ See Revelation 5:12.

⁸ See Google and Millard J. Erickson's book, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed., Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 1998, pages 1008-9.

⁹ "Jesus insists that the kingdom comes in stages. The final climactic burst, the consummation, lies ahead; meanwhile, the inauguration of the kingdom" already began during His 1st coming. D. A. Carson, *Jesus's Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, Repackaged ed. 2018, p. 337. Carson also lays out a great overview of the kingdom stages on the top of p. 347.

¹⁰ "Jesus' Glorious Return: A Theological Exposition," a 1-page article by the Spiritual Heritage Committee, 2019.

¹¹ See discussion in *Evangelical Convictions*, Free Church Publications, Minneapolis, MN, 2011, pp. 212-213.

¹² See Ephesians 2:8-9, Hebrews 10:11-14, and Romans 6:9-10.

¹³ *Evangelical Convictions*, Free Church Publications, Minneapolis, MN, 2011, p. 212.

¹⁴ I urge people to consider the "ABC's." A – Admit that you have sinned. B – believe that Jesus died on the cross for your sin. C – choose to trust Jesus as your Savior and follow Him as Your Lord.

But there is a future dimension to our salvation that we have not yet experienced: it's called glorification. It's still the same salvation that Jesus already purchased, but it is the finalized reality of what our salvation fully entails. This dimension is so far beyond our current experience, that it's difficult for us to clearly imagine or understand. In terms of this future reality, we could say that our salvation isn't finished yet; it's not yet completed. Here's one of the key reasons why this glorious future is so difficult to imagine: we will switch from our present reality of resisting sin's power, to our future reality when sin is no longer even present. Our salvation will one day be SO glorious that sin will be completely absent from our reality!¹⁵ Can you even imagine that? (Sounds glorious to me!)

Another reason why it's so difficult for us to imagine this glorious future, is that this glorification will involve more than just Jesus. 2 Thessalonians 2:14 explains it this way, "He (God) called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ."¹⁶ For most of us, it's easier to envision the glory of Jesus than it is to envision our own glorification. But, as strange as it may sound, we share in His glory. To be clear, we are NOT talking about receiving our own glory, we are talking about SHARING in HIS glory.¹⁷ Part of sharing in Jesus' glory will be receiving our own, new, glorified body. We learn about this in Philippians 3:20-21, "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."¹⁸ Are you looking forward to getting a new body? The earthly bodies that we are currently residing in, are due for a MASSIVE upgrade! We should take care of our bodies. But no matter how hard we work at keeping our bodies in good shape, they are slowly moving toward their eventual endpoint. But for believers, no worries, Jesus has a new body waiting for us. And the new one? It will be GLORIOUS!¹⁹

We could summarize this 3-dimensional salvation this way:

As Christ-followers, we have been saved,
we are being saved, and
we will be saved.

Our salvation has a past, present, and future dimension to it. In the future, our salvation will have a glorious finale!²⁰ Jesus' Glorious Return also reminds us that...

3. We have a confident hope. Advent is a celebration of Jesus' 1st coming, some 2,000 years ago, but Advent is also a reminder of our hope in His glorious 2nd coming. We are confident that He is returning for us and that is something to feel VERY encouraged about.²¹ J. R. R. Tolkien has become quite famous for writing *The Hobbit*, as well as the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. The 3rd book in that series is titled, "The Return of the King." It's by far, my favorite of the three. A key theme running throughout the trilogy is the need for the king to return, to return and set things right. To rescue his people, and to rule and lead them so that evil can be fully and finally defeated.²² However, some people had lost hope that the king would ever return. Even some of the stewards, who were left in charge until the king's return, had begun to lose hope. Their confidence had been worn down by the long wait. I can remember when the third and final movie of Tolkien's trilogy was released. There were hundreds of us waiting in line, out in the cold December weather. There was SO MUCH eager expectation among Tolkien fans to see this long-awaited movie, "The Return of the King." I also remember feeling a little convicted: shouldn't I be

¹⁵ And there will be no more "death or mourning or crying or pain." Revelation 21:4.

¹⁶ The Apostle Peter also writes about this in 1 Peter 5:1, 4, "To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed... And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away. See also 1 Peter 5:10 and Romans 8:18.

¹⁷ However, consider 1 Corinthians 9:24-27.

¹⁸ See also 1 John 3:2.

¹⁹ Consider 2 Corinthians 4:16-18.

²⁰ To learn more about this idea of believers' "glorification," see Millard J. Erickson's book, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed., Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 1998, pages 1008-1013.

²¹ Colossians 1:27 reminds us that Christ in you is, "the hope of glory."

²² By the way, the movie is good, but the book is SO MUCH better. Books are almost always better than movies. Movies have to leave so much out. But books go into the more interesting details. A great line from one of the books is "The hands of the king are the hands of a healer, and so shall the rightful king be known."

more excited about the return on my actual king, Jesus, than about some fictional king of Gondor? (Gondor is not even a real city!)

It's seems likely that Tolkien's faith in God shines through in prompting him to craft this particular story line.²³ Brother or Sister in Christ, may our faith in God shine through, with an eagerness for Jesus' return.²⁴ Some time, perhaps some time very soon, we're going to see, with our very own eyes, the return of King Jesus!²⁵

Just to be clear, this hope for Jesus' return is NOT an unsure hope, as in "I hope so." It's a confident hope, as in "I know so." It's the difference between hoping that a particular gift MIGHT be under the Christmas tree for us, and knowing that it's DEFINITELY already under there. We know it's under there either because we saw the evidence of the sales receipt, or because we took a sneak peek at what was hidden in the closet, or because the person who wrapped it, didn't actually wrap it, they just stuck it next to the tree with nothing but a big bow on it! This is the kind of confident hope that grounds us. It sustains us through the toughest challenges in life. When the Apostle Paul wrote these words to the Christ-followers in Thessalonica, he wasn't trying to answer all of their theological questions. He didn't lay out a comprehensive argument for his end times view on the millennium. Paul's reason for writing was to give them a very real hope. Take a look at 1 Thessalonians 4:13, "Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope." In other words, one of the amazing blessings and benefits of following Christ, is that we have a confident hope for our future. And even though we do grieve at times, we don't grieve like those who have no hope. Our grief is different. Our grief includes a peace that passes understanding, because our grief rests in the assurance of Jesus' Glorious Return. This is what God's Word is driving at in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, "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."²⁶

We know without a doubt, that Jesus WILL return gloriously. And we'll be ready, and waiting for Him. Praise God! This is going to happen! Amen?

*This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on December 1, 2019 by Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson*

²³ "Tolkien's devout Roman Catholic faith was a significant factor in the conversion of C. S. Lewis from atheism to Christianity." (Carpenter, Humphrey (1978). *The Inklings*. Allen & Unwin. ISBN 978-0-00-774869-3.) "He once wrote in a letter to Rayner Unwin's daughter Camilla, who wished to know what the purpose of life was, that "[i]t may be said that the chief purpose of life, for any one of us, is to increase according to our capacity our knowledge of God by all the means we have, and to be moved by it to praise and thanks." (Ware, Jim (2006). *Finding God in The Hobbit*. p. xxii. ISBN 978-1-4143-0596-7.)

²⁴ This world is not our home; we're just passing through. See Philippians 3:20 and 1 Peter 1:17.

²⁵ Read Titus 2:11-14. Just knowing that our king is going to return changes everything. It not only gives us hope but it gives us purpose. It gives meaning and drive to all that we do. We can't really say that we have placed hope in something if it doesn't change the way we live. See 1 John 2:28.

²⁶ See Matthew 24:30-31.