

**“Touching Heaven:
A PRAYER OF HOPE”**

Revelation 22:16-17, 20-21

We can pray, confident in our victory!

A sermon preached by
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When you read a book, do you ever get curious about the end before you get there? I do. I confess that sometimes I will get halfway through a novel, and the anticipation gets the best of me, and I have to turn to the last page, to find out who's still alive, who has been defeated, and who has won the victory. I really had a struggle when I read the Harry Potter series a few years ago. I had read through the first six books, and when the seventh and final book came out, it was all I could do to keep from turning to the last page to see if Harry and his friends survived in the end. It was tough, but I held fast. I didn't look. In the end, I was glad I didn't.

As we close out this series on great prayers of the Bible today, I want to turn to the last page of the book. Let's see how it all comes out in the end. This is not cheating; God wants you to know how it all ends. That's what the last book is all about. The good news is, everything is revealed in the end, just like in the last book of Harry Potter. The bad news is, it is very hard to understand. It is with great irony that we call it the Book of Revelation. There is so much that is confusing in what is revealed. Jesus came and went; now he's coming again? What's all that about? Our natural question is, "When is all this going to take place?" What does the return of Christ have to do with us and our walk of faith today?

The return of Christ to earth, the so-called Second Coming of Jesus or Parousia, is a belief that has deep roots in our Biblical and historical faith. The Book of Acts clearly states that the same Jesus who ascended into heaven after the resurrection will return again in the same way. References to the coming of the Son of Man are scattered throughout the New Testament, and the roots of that belief are found in many of the writings of the prophets in the Old Testament. The prophets envisioned a Day of the Lord, when the Messiah of God would come and defeat evil and establish God's Kingdom forever.

This has been the faith of the Church since the beginning. The most ancient of creeds, the Apostles' Creed, says that Christ will come

from heaven “to judge the quick and the dead.” (When I was a child, that gave me great comfort, because I was alive, and I was slow.)

The Book of Revelation gives us a vision of the end of history. What a picture it is—supernatural horsemen, dragons and beasts, great cosmic wars, gigantic angelic choirs, and in the middle of it all, the Son of Man, Jesus Christ, the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End, the Savior of the world. What is important to remember is that the Book of Revelation is a picture, not a prediction. It is a document written in a particular literary style called apocalyptic literature. It is intended for a persecuted community of Christians at the end of the first century A. D. It does not and was never intended to predict historical occurrences in the 19th, 20th, or 21st centuries. That has not stopped people from using it that way. That being said, Revelation is still a very important document for our faith.

Taking into consideration all of Scripture—the Old Testament prophecies, the words of Jesus, the letters of Paul, and the vision of Revelation—we can say three things about the conclusion of history:

1. Christ will come again, and God will establish his kingdom on earth forever.
2. We don't know when that will happen.
3. Until it happens, we should be ready and not wait in idleness.

That is the teaching of Scripture in a nutshell. This faith in the return of Christ has an impact on our spiritual life in at least three ways.

Believing in the coming of Jesus gives us **the assurance of hope**. We never have to lose heart; we never have to give up; because we know that God will ultimately redeem our situation. No matter how bad things get, we can still have hope. As Paul wrote to the Roman church, we can even “*boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that was given to us.*”¹ Confident in God's love, we don't have to fear

anything. We can have hope through everything. Whatever happens, God will make a way for us.

Don Moen was one of the pioneers of contemporary Christian music. He is still producing music and can be heard on Christian radio today. Several years ago, he was awakened in the middle of the night by one of those dreaded phone calls. His mother-in-law was calling to tell Don and his wife that his wife's sister, Susan, her husband, Craig, and their four little boys were in a car accident. Jeremy, the oldest son, age 8, had been killed. Everyone else was injured. As Don and his wife grieved in their own hearts and tried to comfort their family, they felt helpless to communicate any hope or grace to Susan and Craig. But then God gave Don the words to one of his most famous songs:

God will make a way when there seems to be no way.

He works in ways we cannot see;

He will make a way for me.

He will be my guide, hold me closely to his side.

With love and strength for each new day,

He will make a way.²

God is with us to make a way. That's the assurance of hope.

Our hearts are filled with hope knowing that Christ will one day return and rule, and that gives us **the power of endurance**. We can rely on Christ and his strength. We can make it through our times of trouble and hardship, because we know how it all will ultimately end. We want to be on the side of victory.

The message of the whole book of Revelation to the oppressed minority of Christians can be boiled down to two words: ***hold fast***. Revelation 14:12 says, "*Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and hold fast to the faith of Jesus.*" That's the message of the whole end-time vision. Hold fast in the midst of persecution. Don't give up your faith. Resist the forces of evil. Endure your hardship. Stay the course and win the victory.

We have been seeing some remarkable stories of endurance this week in the wake of Hurricane Harvey. Record-setting rainfall, massive floods, widespread power outages, homes and businesses ruined, people stranded—it's been an epic mess.

Most of us know somebody who has been affected. We have church families with kids and grandkids in Houston. I saw the face and name of a pastor friend of mine in one of the articles.

But in the midst of all the devastation, we have seen the power of endurance. First responders and hospital personnel have worked around the clock to rescue people and take care of lost and devastated victims. Neighbors formed human chains to help people get out of homes and cars. A furniture dealer named "Mattress Mack" sent his furniture trucks around, picking up people, and had 400 refugees sheltered in his furniture stores.³ Prayers and gifts and supplies have begun to pour in as the hearts of people all over the country and the world break for the victims.

In times like these, we see the strength of the human spirit. We see the power of endurance. We see how communities stick together, and people give of themselves for others. A Houston TV station tweeted, "Harvey has taken a lot, but it will NEVER take our humanity. We have seen so many neighbors helping each other. THANK YOU."⁴ It's really quite encouraging.

This is Christ's way of letting us know he is coming back. He gives us the power to endure through our difficult circumstances. Otherwise, what would be the point? People don't fight to live if there's nothing to live for.

Believing in the coming of Christ gives us the assurance of hope, the power of endurance, and **the certainty of victory**. We will be on the winning side if we hold fast, if we keep the faith, because one thing we know for sure: in the end, God wins!

Bad stuff is going to happen. Natural disasters will be devastating. Diseases, deaths of loved ones, divorce, hardships of many kinds—sometimes it's hard to believe we are on the winning side. But take

courage, especially when you seem to be on the losing end of things. Your victory is assured. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you are on the winning team. You are owned and managed and coached by the Creator, the Almighty God of love. How can you lose?

One of the legendary figures in the sport of football was Vince Lombardi, long-time coach of the Green Bay Packers. One time he was asked what it took to make a winning team, since he had made so many of them. He answered, “There are lots of coaches with good ball clubs who know the fundamentals and have plenty of discipline but still don’t win the game. Then you come to the third ingredient; if you’re going to play together as a team, you’ve got to care for one another. You’ve got to love each other. Each player has to be thinking about the next guy and saying to himself, ‘If I don’t block that man, [our halfback] is going to get his legs broken. I have to do my job well in order that he can do his.’

“The difference between mediocrity and greatness,” Lombardi said, “is the feeling these guys have for each other.”⁵

The difference between defeat and victory is simply the power of love. We are bound together in community, and the connection of love makes us accountable to and for each other. Love is what keeps us on the team. We are connected through this community of faith to the God of love, who loved the world so much he gave his only Son. We believe in the Son, who loved us enough to die for our sins. We serve a God who loved his Son so much that he raised him from the dead and opened up the way for our resurrection. And we worship a Christ who still loves the world so much that he has promised to return and establish his Kingdom.

The love of God gives us the assurance of hope. The love of God gives us the power to endure. The love of God gives us the certainty of victory. Love will bring Jesus back to claim his children.

The last great prayer in Scripture comes at the very end and consists of only three words: “*Come, Lord Jesus!*”⁶ They were praying for the return of Christ. In the Lord’s Supper, we believe

Jesus comes to be among us. He is present in a special and spiritual way. As we gather at his table today, we can pray with Christians of every age, “Come, Lord Jesus.” Let’s invite Jesus to come, to give us the assurance of hope, the power of endurance, and the certainty of victory.

Come, Lord Jesus!

The Spirit and the church, the bride of Christ, say, “Come!”

Let everyone who hears say, “Come!”

Let everyone who believes say, “Come!”

Let everyone who thirsts for the water of life say, “Come!”

Let everyone who is hungry for salvation say, “Come!”

Come, Lord Jesus!

Amen!

¹ Romans 5:3-5.

² Don Moen, “God Will Make A Way,” © 1990, Integrity’s Hosanna Music/ASCAP.

³ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2017/08/30/human-chains-among-viral-stories-inspiring-us-out-hurricane-harvey/615479001/>.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Vince Lombardi, interviewed by Lee Iococca, cited by Christopher Stinnett, *Leadership*, Vol. 13, No. 3.

⁶ Revelation 22:20.