

Unpacking The Future *What's Next*

What happens when we get so discouraged in life that we loose hope? It's like we can't go on isn't it?

Hope is what keeps us moving through life. Hope is what energizes us to keep tackling life's challenges. What is real hope and where does it come from?

Listen to these verses from the Bible:

Be of good courage, And He shall strengthen your heart, All you who hope in the LORD. Psalm 31:24

Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him For the help of His countenance. Psalm 42:5

Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, And whose hope is the LORD. Jeremiah 17:7

This hope we have as an anchor of the soul... Hebrews 6:19

...looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ... Titus 2:13

Last week we began a series we're calling "Unpacking The Future." You might subtitle this whole series *The reason for hope.*

We took some time last week to lay the ground work for looking at biblical prophecy.

We saw that the Bible is filled with prewritten history. In passages that are sometimes 1000 years removed from the event, God's prophets tell us with precision what will happen.

They tell us about Jesus Christ, the nation of Israel, and the nations of the world.

Today, looking back, we can read the predictions and then scrutinize the fulfillments to see if the biblical prophets were accurate.

What we find is, the Bible's predictions are exact. The Bible may have been penned down by human beings, but its ultimate source was God Himself.

In fact, in Deuteronomy 18 God gives us the acid test for prophets. He let's us know that if anybody claims to be His prophet and they're not 100% accurate, they're lying. They don't represent Him.

The Bible sets the bar as high as possible by saying that God's prophets are 100% accurate, 100% of the time.

And that becomes vital to what we're studying now. We're studying what God says is going to happen in the future. If God's prophets were 100% accurate 100% of the time then that's the same standard you'd expect when God tells us what's next in prophecy.

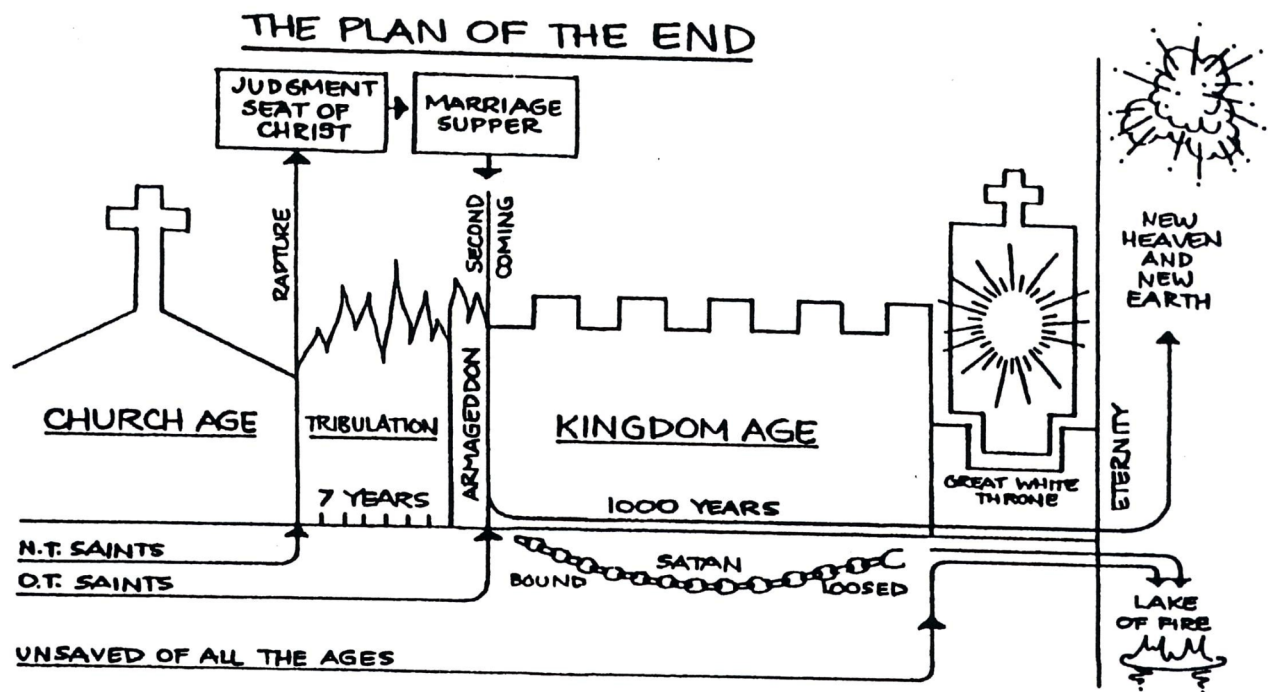
Why can we have hope for the future? Because we can personally know the God of past, present, and future.

Today we want to try to answer the question "What's next?" What is it that's next on God's prophetic timetable?

We've included a chart in your bulletins this week, that gives you a brief overview of God's plan for the last days as explained in the Bible.

In the next couple of weeks we'll be dealing with these major events and exploring the Bible's explanation of what's going to happen.

Let's start by familiarizing ourselves with the chart. There are 4 major time periods covered by this chart, as well as a number of major events.



We start off reading left to right, with the Church Age. This is the time of History that we're in right now.

With each person who trusts Jesus Christ as Savior the number of people in the church, or the Body of Christ, grows. The church age started 50 days after the crucifixion, on the Jewish feast of Pentecost.

The Church age ends with the prophetic event we want to talk this morning, the rapture.

The rapture takes believers off this earth, and then comes the events we read about in the book of Revelation, the tribulation period. This is a time of God's judgment, but it's also an unparalleled time of people around the globe coming to know the Savior.

The tribulation is followed by the battle of Armageddon and the inauguration of a thousand year reign of Christ on earth.

Ultimately there's the great white throne judgment of unbelievers and the creation of the New Heavens and New Earth.

Even if we don't understand all the terminology or all the details we can be sure of one

thing. God's got a plan. God's got a plan and His plan includes us.

We don't have to get down because of all the things that are happening in our world or in our personal lives, because the same God who flung the stars into space, created this world, has a plan.

He's in control. His plan's been in effect for thousands of years.

If there is no God and we were just here for a few short years and then they put us in a grave where we melded back into the elements and that's it we'd have every reason to be hopeless.

If the best we had to look forward to was what ever was going to be in the headlines tomorrow we'd have every reason to despair but the good news of the Bible is that the God of hope can fill us with all joy and peace.

I. We Are Promised A Blessed Hope

Turn to Titus 2, PG 1059 Read vs 11-14

People have all kinds of ideas about what should motivate believers in Jesus to totally devoted followers of Jesus. They uses fear, guilt, whatever to try to convince them to live right.

God uses His grace, instead. His grace that brings salvation also motivates us to live for Him. And part of that motivation to live for Jesus is that Jesus is coming back for us.

In fact, Jesus coming back for us is our blessed hope. The word translated "blessed," *makarios* literally means "happy."

A believer has a happy hope. We have something that should get us excited. It's the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus.

The classic Bible passage that deals with this hope is found in I Thessalonians 4.

Turn to PG 1050

The one individual that stands out as the prominent missionary to the 1st century Mediterranean world was a man named Paul. He was a hard-nosed Jewish persecutor of Christians who had his life turned upside down by meeting Jesus.

As Paul traveled around the Roman Empire he usually went into the synagogues first. In Thessalonica he reasoned out of the Old Testament that the promised Messiah had to die and rise and that Jesus of Nazareth was that Messiah.

The unbelieving Jews got mad and ran him out of town. The Thessalonian Christians hoped that Jesus would return and save them from persecution.

The problem was Jesus didn't return and over time some of the Christians in Thessalonica had died. The people were confused. Would the ones who died miss out on the blessing when Jesus did return?

Here's the explanation. **Read vs 13-14**

We always struggle with the death of someone we love because death isn't natural. Everybody dies but it's still not natural.

God is the source of life and He created us to live. Death isn't a part of God's ultimate plan. We know that because the Bible says that in eternity God makes all things new and there won't be any crying, sickness, or death.

Those things are all here because of sin. Death is an enemy. But, it's a defeated enemy.

When a believer dies the Bible says we're *absent from the body and...present with the Lord*. II Corinthians 5:8

But God didn't create us to be without a body.

When Jesus rose from the dead He rose bodily. Luke tells us that when the disciples saw Jesus raised they couldn't believe their eyes. They thought He was spirit. But listen to what Jesus says to them, "*Behold My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself. Handle Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have.*" Luke 24:39

Jesus is the first of all the rest who would rise. So while a believers' spirit goes to heaven, God isn't finished until the bodily resurrection.

So according to I Thessalonians 4 Jesus brings those who have died with Him.

Read vs 15a *For this we say to you by the word of the Lord,*

“We’re not making this up. This is God’s revelation...”

Read 15b

When Jesus comes to raise the dead in what we call the “rapture” the living don’t have any advantage over the dead. **Read vs 16**

The dead rise bodily first and when they’re standing up we who are alive are caught up with them. **Read vs 17**

That’s the blessed hope.

I. We Are Promised A Blessed Hope

II. In The Rapture We Will Be Glorified

When Paul preached the truth of the resurrection to the philosophers in Athens, most of them mocked him. That’s because to the Greeks getting rid of their body was the great hope. To them the body was a prison for the soul.

Besides that, a body decays and returns to the elements of the earth.

In Jesus day the Jewish Pharisees believed in a resurrection from the dead, but the other main religious party, the Sadducees, didn’t.

Well the Bible explains that if there is no resurrection, then Jesus didn’t rise. If Jesus didn’t rise then we’re all doomed. If Jesus didn’t rise then what hope do we have for eternity?

How does a resurrection happen? What are the mechanics of a body that’s disintegrated into dust being raised?

I don’t know. But I know this. If God could create Adam from the dust of the ground and breath into him the breath of life, I’m sure He can handle a resurrection.

For some insight into the resurrection body, turn with me to **I Corinthians 15 Pg 1023**

Read vs 35 -44

When Jesus Christ returns (and remember this can be at any time, no one knows when) the dead in Christ will rise first.

That's not a reconstruction. It's a resurrection. It's like a plant growing up out of a seed. One's not identical to the other, but they are related.

The natural body is mortal (in other words it can die), and is corruptible (it is subject to disease and decay). The resurrection body is incorruptible and immortal. It's a spiritual body but it's not just a spirit.

Jesus rose bodily. The grave clothes He had been buried in were there in the tomb, but Jesus was gone. The stone didn't have to be rolled away to let Jesus out, it was rolled away to let other's in!

Now, I John 3:2 says we shall be like Him.

That means we'll have material bodies that can be touched and seen. We'll be able to speak, move through solid substances, and will never die.

For the people in Thessalonica this was good news because they thought those who had died had missed out.

For us it's good news because we have the opportunity to avoid death. I Thessalonians 4 says, *Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them...*

That's where we get the word "rapture." Rapture is from the Latin verb *rapto* which means "to seize" "to carry off" "to catch up."

This is like a "living resurrection" if we could use that term.

I Corinthians 15 read vs 51-54

This is a mystery. A mystery in the New Testament isn't some riddle we need to figure out. It's actually a truth that's being revealed for the first time.

This wasn't in the Old Testament. This wasn't in the gospels. Resurrection was, but not this catching away of living believers.

What's new is that some will not die. Some who are alive and remain will put on incorruption without having to die first.

Dr. Kenneth Wuest, who was a great Greek scholar, explained the various shades of meaning of *harpazo*, the word translated “caught up” in I Thessalonians 4:17. Each of these nuances adds a special dimension to the character of the rapture.

1) *to catch away speedily* This is going to be quick, in the twinkling of an eye. You’re not going to have 6 weeks to get ready. When it happens, it will happen suddenly and it will all be over in an instant.

2) *to seize by force* We’re in enemy territory. Satan will do all that he can to hinder the process but God will be victorious.

3) *to claim for oneself* We’re God’s possession and He’s claiming what’s rightfully His. We were bought with a price.

4) *to move to a new place* In John 14 Jesus said, “I go to prepare a place for you.” Our citizenship is in heaven and heaven is a place just surely as earth is a place.

5) *to rescue from danger* There’s enormous danger in the future of the planet. After the rapture comes the tribulation with Satan’s fury and God’s wrath both being unleashed on this earth. The rapture removes believers from that time.

I. We Are Promised A Blessed Hope

II. In The Rapture We Will Be Glorified

III. The Church’s Ultimate Blessing Is To See Jesus

Maybe you’ve been following the Starbucks cup controversy. Over the past year Starbucks has been printing quotes from famous and not so famous people on their cups.

Starbucks says, “We see this program as an extension of the coffeehouse culture – a way to promote open, respectful conversation among a wide variety of individuals.”

Some of the quotes have been thought provoking like the one by Noah ben Shea, “Do not kiss your children so they will kiss you back, but so they will kiss their children...”

Unfortunately some of the quotes have been offensive like this one from Joel Stein, columnist for the Los Angeles Times.

It said, “Heaven is totally overrated. It seems boring. Clouds, listening to people play

the harp. It should be somewhere you can't wait to go, like a luxury hotel. Maybe blue skies and soft music were enough to keep people in line in the 17th century, but Heaven has to step it up a bit. They're basically getting by because they only have to be better than Hell."

To me that just shows a total lack of understanding about the wonders of heaven.

I find it interesting that rather than talking about believers being in heaven, the biblical phrase is "with the Lord."

The focus of the Bible isn't being in heaven, it's being with Jesus Christ in heaven. That's what makes heaven heavenly.

Romans 8:29 says that God has predestined everyone who has trusted Christ as Savior to be conformed to the image of His Son.

God's at work in our life today using the joys and the sorrows to produce the character of Jesus in our life. It's going to happen because God has predetermined that it will.

At the rapture we receive the culmination of all that. We'll be like Him, in His image, glorified.

Turn to Ephesians 1 pg 1038

Read vs 5-6

We're predestined to be counted as adult sons in God's family to the praise of the glory of His grace.

Read vs 11-12

We're predestined to be to the praise of His glory.

That means that our redeemed lives will shine out the wonder of His glory. They'll magnify the wonder of His grace.

Listen to John's description of what it will be like in heaven, *Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne, the living creatures, and the elders; and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice: "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain To receive*

power and riches and wisdom, And strength and honor and glory and blessing!”

Sorry, but I just don’t see anything boring about that. Nobody’s yawning, nobody’s playing harps, nobody’s taking a nap.

All the focus is on the worthiness of the Lamb who was slain. Our words, our lives are going to magnify the glory of His grace.

See this one on the throne chose to leave that throne for a time and come to earth. The eternal God locked Himself into a human body and time and space.

The one who was the epitome of purity rubbed shoulders with the wicked of this world.

Then on the day appointed by the Father he was taken to a cruel cross and nailed there to die. No angels were singing, no shouts of joy were going up, just a bruised and bloody man dieing on the cross.

Why? Because all of us were in desperate need of His grace. He bore our sins. He paid the price.

He was the lamb who was slain. All of our sins were placed on Jesus Christ at the cross. He was the great High Priest who offered the sacrifice of Himself.

That was all done so that we could live. So that a holy God would be free to show us His grace.

In heaven were going to walk on streets of gold, drink from the water of life, talk to the great men and women of God from the past, and be enamored by angel choirs.

But none of that will be what makes heaven, heaven for us. What makes it heaven is to walk and talk with our Savior. To see His glory and be reflections of His glory.

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IV. The Rapture Could Happen At Any Moment

One of the problems the Jews faced when they read the Old Testament was the seemingly contradictory statements the prophets made about the coming Messiah.

Isaiah speaks of the Messiah as being a suffering servant in Isaiah 53, but as a ruling king in Isaiah 7. The Rabbis debated the meanings back and forth. Some thought there might even be 2 Messiahs.

Today we can look and see that Jesus came once as Savior 2000 years ago. When He steps His foot on the earth again He'll come as conquering King. There aren't two Messiahs, there's two comings of one Messiah.

The same can be said for the verses about Jesus return in the New Testament. You read through Matthew 24, Mark 13, Luke 17 and you begin to have questions about timing. I believe the Bible gives us the overview the way it does because God doesn't want us setting dates or trying to figure out the "when" questions. He wants us to live in a continual state of readiness.

What we can know is there seems to be a clear difference between the coming of the Lord at the end of the age, and the rapture which could be at any time.

There are three basic views on the timing of the rapture. Some believe it will be before the 7 year tribulation. Some think He will come for his church halfway through the tribulation. And still others believe that Jesus will return after the tribulation.

Those views are known as pre, mid, and post tribuationalism.

Here at Faith Community we believe that the pretribulational view most adequately explains the passages.

The second coming, which clearly happens at the end of the tribulation, is very different from the rapture.

Let me just list a few differences.

1. Rapture: we're caught up to Him
II Coming: Comes down to earth (Revelation 19)
2. Rapture: There's no change in the nations of the world
II Coming: Gentile nations are judged
3. Rapture: Creation Is unchanged
II Coming: Creation is delivered from the curse

4. Rapture: A mystery not before revealed
II Coming: Is plain in both the Old and New Testaments
5. Rapture: Our hope is centered in Christ
II Coming: The kingdom is at hand
6. Rapture: Christ comes as the bridegroom
II Coming: Christ comes as the king
7. Rapture: Christ isn't said to be seen
II Coming: Every eye will see Him

The tribulation is clearly a time of God's wrath being poured out upon this world. The church is described as the body of Christ, the temple of God, and the bride of Christ.

The Bible says, *God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.* I Thessalonians 5:9

Jesus promised, *I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world...* Revelation 3:10

So, if we're correct in saying that the rapture happens before the tribulation, what does that mean practically for us?

It means that there's nothing else that needs to happen first. It means that the rapture is the next event on God's prophetic timetable. It means that there's never been a time in the history of the church when there's more likelihood of the rapture to occur any day. It means that the most important question we're confronted with doesn't have anything to do with our house, our job, or our bank account.

The most basic question is this: Are you ready? Are you prepared to meet God? If the rapture happened today, would you be left behind?

Jesus told a very religious man named Nicodemus that the answer to the world's spiritual dilemma was to be born again.

In fact He said, *Most assuredly I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.* John 3:3

Then He gave this explanation of how this spiritual birth takes place. He said, *For God*

so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him would not perish, but have everlasting life. John 3:16