

**Alpha and Omega
PREPARING FOR CHRIST'S RETURN**

"I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End," Revelation 22:13. Jesus is Lord in all times. We can trust Him to hold our lives in His hands from birth to death and beyond. Our past, our present, and our future belong to Him and one day He will come to take us home.

One of the most beloved of Christmas carols we sing each year is "Joy To The World." Yet that carol was not written to celebrate our Savior's birth. It was written by Isaac Watts (in 1719), based on Psalm 98, celebrating Jesus' triumphal return at the end of time. ***... let them sing before the LORD, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity,*** Psalm 98. The Lord will come, the day of judgement will arrive, and Jesus – the true Son of the Almighty - will bring God's creation – including us - to completion.

He made that promise Himself: ***If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also,*** He declared, John 14:3.

Reading the New Testament, one can hardly avoid noting that the earliest Christians expected Christ's return at any moment. Some worried that believers had died and yet Christ had not returned. Paul wrote to assure them that those who have died in Christ will not be forgotten, ***For the Lord himself will come down from heaven ... and the dead in Christ will rise first,*** 1 Thess. 4:16. Down to this very day there have been hopes, speculations, and predictions among Christians about Christ's return - the Second Coming of Christ. ***According to the Lord's own word...*** 1 Thess. 4:15.

WHEN CHRIST RETURNS

In the 1970's and again in the 1990's popular books and movies highlighted themes of the end times and Christ's return. Combining Jesus' words in Matthew 24, with predictions from the O. T. prophet Daniel, along with Paul's words in 1 Thessalonians, and images from the book of Revelation, writers have constructed stories about the end of the age. The "Rapture," that is the taking up of believers to heaven – as in 1 Thess. – then a time of "Tribulation," and "Armageddon," the great, final battle with the forces of evil, all figure into these stories. Just prior to the year 2,000, there was renewed interest in themes about Christ's return, the Apocalypse, and the end of time.¹ Did you know that around the year 1,000 much of Europe was ablaze with talk of Christ's return?

Christians have always believed in the Second Coming of Christ. When Christ ascended into heaven, the angels promised the disciples that, ***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. Belief in the Second Coming has long been considered one of the fundamental truths of our faith. In our communion service we say, or sing,

“Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again.” Even though we have often argued about the details surrounding His return, Christians of every denomination have agreed on this fact: Jesus Christ will return.

Today I am not going to spend time on the details of His return or the timing, for no one knows these things but the Father in heaven. As John Wesley said: “Some things are not given us to know in this lifetime.” Instead, let’s look at how we can be prepared for His return.

PREPARATION

All of Matthew chapter 24 is devoted to His answer to the disciples’ question, *... what will be the sign of your coming, and of the end of the age?* Matt. 24:3. Sitting there on the Mount of Olives with his disciples Jesus described the signs of the end times and the coming of the Son of Man (as He often referred to Himself). *At that time ... They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory...* Matt. 24:30-31.

Jesus gave warning not be deceived by false messiahs, and to be ready for His return. *Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come,* Matt. 24: 42.

To keep watch is not a passive thing, rather it is to be preparing for His second coming. What ought we to be doing until Jesus returns? Here are a few suggestions:

1. Let’s Remember: Now We Are His Children. *... now we are children of God, and ... we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, ... Those who have this hope purify themselves as Christ is pure,* I John 3:2. Today we are forgiven. In this moment we are redeemed. Our home in heaven has been secured by Jesus Christ Himself, and we know that one day we “shall be like him.” Now is the time to “purify ourselves as Christ is pure.”

2. Let’s Now Put Off Sin. *For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin...* Romans 6:6-8.

In 1741 John Wesley wrote a sermon on “Christian Perfection” based on Phil. 3:12, *Not that I ... have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.* Wesley emphasized salvation as the total restoration of God’s image of in us. He meant the recovery of our power to resist sin, and to love God completely. He called this full recovery “Christian Perfection.” He urged his followers to “go on to perfection” and to “expect to be made perfect in this life.” Many heard in these words (and many still hear) an impossible goal which only leads to a self-righteous perfectionism and spiritual elitism. But this misunderstands Wesley. He grounded his concept of Christian Perfection in the early Eastern traditions of a never-ending aspiration for all of love’s perfecting fullness. Christ’s atonement on the cross for our sins, our justification, is what God does *for* us. Being made more and more holy, our sanctification is what God does *in* us. *Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.... For them I sanctify myself that they too may be truly sanctified,* John 17:17, 19. Going on to perfection is allowing God’s perfect love, day by day, to fill all aspects of our living.

3. Let's Now Abide In Christ. As a branch is connected to the vine, we want to be connected to Christ so that our lives can be shaped after His (John 15). *Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us...* Eph. 5:1-2.

What kind of difference would it make if the things that broke Christ's heart also broke our hearts? What kind of difference would it make if the things that motivated Him motivated us? What if we saw the world as He sees it?

4. Let's Now Produce The Fruit Of The Spirit. When we remain attached to the vine of Christ – the source of life-giving goodness - we can bear fruit. *This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples,* John 15:8. It is the fruit of the Spirit that Christ desires of us.

This includes how we handle all the resources given us: money, family, our time, and the gospel. What we do with what we have, witnesses to our living for Him and preparing for His return.

When we ask people at FUMC to make a pledge of their money and time we're really asking for spiritual growth. Pledging our resources to God's service is an unselfish act and a tangible way of putting ourselves at God's disposal.

5. Let's Now Be His Witnesses. This may be the most important thing Jesus has for us to do. His last words before ascending to heaven were these: *... go and make disciples of all nations,* Matt 28:18. This same instruction is found in all the accounts of Jesus.

Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation, Mark 16:15.

As You sent Me in to the world, I also have sent them into the world, John 17:18.

... and you shall be my witnesses ... to the remotest part of the earth, Acts 1:8.

Jesus felt so strongly about this commission to make disciples that He made this His final commandment. He sent us the Holy Spirit as our power source to obey His command *We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us,* 2 Cor. 5:20. What do our words, actions, and lifestyles say about Christ in our lives? If you were charged with being a genuine Christian, would there be evidence enough to prove it?

THE WINNING TEAM

Today many people will be watching the Super Bowl: the great football teams will go head-to-head for the crown of a national championship. One team will be the winner, and one will be the loser. Players and fans of the winning team will rejoice. Those of the losers will ...

But here's the truth for those on Jesus' team: No matter where we come from, or how we're doing at the moment, in God's eyes we are all "lovable losers" because we are by no means "professional saints." The good news is that Jesus is the captain of the team and He's never lost a game yet. Being on His team puts us on the winning team and over time we play more like Him. Let's always remember where we came from, where we are going, and what we're doing on the way.

Christians can't simply play in one small corner of the field – you have to play the whole field or you will lose. That means all spheres of life. If Wesley teaches us anything, it is that salvation is not something that is merely announced to us, it is

something that God works in us – His holiness permeating our lives and history. Ours is to make disciples, not just converts.

OUR ULTIMATE DESTINATION

Since we are now children of God, surely then we would know where is our true home. *Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands, 2 Cor. 5:1.*

If you know Jesus Christ as your Savior, you've become a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven. When you said yes to Jesus, God gave you a new passport stamped "Kingdom of Heaven." That's the great defining spiritual truth. You can't pretend that you are still a citizen of this world. You can't live the way you used to live because you're not the person you used to be. You're being transformed, just as Jesus says, "*I am making everything new...*" Rev. 21:5.

In our U. M. Book of Worship there is this prayer from the funeral service: "Help us to live as those who are prepared to die. And when our days here are accomplished, enable us to die as those who go forth to live, so that living or dying, our life may be in you, and that nothing in life or in death will be able to separate us from your great love in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Jesus may come at any time. He's sure to come some time. Let's be ready to receive Him all the time.

¹ In 1997 U.S. News and World Report carried a cover story called "Dark Prophecies." It reported that a recent survey showed that 66% of Americans believed that Jesus Christ would return to earth someday – and this included 1/3rd of those who said they never attend church.