

BaptistWay: Jesus is coming again

November 8, 2013

- *The BaptistWay lesson for Nov. 24 focuses on 2 Peter 1:16-2:3; 3:1-18.*

Jesus's return: Obsession vs. faith

I was shocked to discover a remake of the first *Left Behind* movie is set to release starring Nicholas Cage. I was a teenager when this series initially became popular and remember eagerly waiting to watch the movie with my youth group. This was to my generation what Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth* was to the 1970s. Before being exposed to this phenomenon, I do not recall ever hearing a sermon about "end times." During and following its release, that seems to be all I remember hearing about at church.

Opinions vary about the theology presented in this kind of popular religious fiction. Personally, I went from buying all of it as a teenager to questioning most of it as a college and seminary student. Perhaps the most unfortunate result of this can be seen in the extremes represented when it comes to teaching/preaching about Christ's return. One professor told me about a church he temporarily served that had a Sunday school class that only studied the book of Revelation.

"What happened when they made it all the way though?" I asked.

"They started over," he told me.

On the opposite end of the spectrum lies advice I heard from a mentor who was pastor at a large church in the city: "I just think there are a lot more important things to preach about that have to do with the way that we live

for God right now."

One of the main messages in 2 Peter is that faith in Jesus's return is not something to be forgotten, nor is it something to be exploited. It has an important role in framing the way we strive to live faithfully until this event comes to a culmination.

Eyewitnesses and prophecy (2 Peter 1:16-21)

From Old Testament prophecy to the witness of the first disciples recorded in the Gospels, the whole of Christianity has embraced Christ's return as real and integral to the faith. This is not just a cleverly devised story meant to make believers feel good or to provide entertainment. For 2 Peter's audience and us, this is something that must be accepted by faith. It's not something that predominates all discussion of faith and practice (like the Sunday school class that only read Revelation), or a point that must be avoided to keep the focus on practical, everyday life (like my mentor assumed). It is an integral part of our faith that sheds light on everything else we believe and do.

Avoiding false teachers (2:1-3)

If anything is presented to the contrary, consider it false teaching. Unfortunately, we are told emphatically "there will be false teachers among you" (v. 1). Perhaps the most common form of false teaching that surrounds this particular article of faith has to do with date setting. You likely remember when the majority of the Christian community hung its head in shame as Harold Camping made another prediction—he previously had made one in 1994—regarding Judgment Day in 2011.

God's faithfulness (3:1-18)

This type of approach totally misses the message behind Jesus' promised return—hope. What if this promise was left out of the Bible? I've sometimes

wondered why, in his foreknowledge, God did not just remain silent on this subject to keep us from speculating ourselves to death. If he had, the Christian story would be incomplete. Even if we still were guaranteed eternal life after our death, the ultimate purpose for which Christ came into our world would not be accomplished if he failed to return and establish his kingdom on the earth. In *Surprised by Hope*, N.T. Wright rightly asserts “God’s kingdom” in the preaching of Jesus refers not to postmortem destiny, nor to our escape from this world into another one, but to God’s sovereign rule coming “on earth as it is in heaven.”

Without this guarantee, God does not really win, and our faith is merely an “escape” from an evil world we have no hope of ever overcoming. To the contrary, 1 Peter 3 frames Christ’s return as the final victory in a divine drama unfolding since creation (vv. 5-7). The exhortation toward the end of the letter is perfectly appropriate for the church today: “Bear in mind that our Lord’s patience means salvation” (v. 15); salvation not only for our souls or our individual selves, but for the whole world God has promised to redeem.

A faithful Sunday school teacher in our congregation once told me he did not think heaven was going to be like it is pictured in the media.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I don’t think we’ll be sitting around on clouds or wandering around in white gowns playing harps. I think we’ll all have jobs that we continually carry out for the Lord.”

If God’s job of redeeming his creation continues into eternity, perhaps he is right. For now, our job is to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (v. 18) as we sincerely trust in his return.