

RANSOMED HEART

LOVE GOD. LIVE FREE.

December 2016

Dear Friends, Allies, Comrades,

Merry Christmas!

I love Christmastime, with the beauty it brings, and the celebration of Jesus. I also love the way the advent season gives us a chance to think about his return. Listen to this marvelous passage from Acts:

Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus. Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets. (Acts 3:19-21)

Jesus remains in heaven *until* the time comes for God to restore everything. Then he leaves heaven and comes to earth. To stay. The heavenly Jerusalem comes to earth, and “the dwelling of God is with men.” (Rev 21:3) Heaven is not the eternal dwelling place of the people of God (!). The new earth is, just as Revelation says. Jesus is in heaven at this moment, but Jesus is anxiously awaiting another Day. He is readying his armies; he is synching the straps on his saddle. There is another event his attention is absolutely fixed upon: “the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.” (Matthew 16:28) “A man of noble birth went to a distant country to have himself appointed king and then to return.” “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.” “Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning, like servants waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet.” (Luke 19:12, Matt 24:42, Luke 12:35-36)

Jesus clearly wanted us to interpret the story from the vantage point of his *return*. Heaven is very, very precious. Heaven is the paradise of God. But if you will notice—I say this reverently, carefully—heaven is not the great anticipated event the writers of the New Testament look forward to: “And we are eagerly waiting for him to return” “...as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed.” “looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God.” (Philippians 3:20, 1 Corinthians 1:7, 2 Peter 3:12)

The great hope and expectation of the Christian faith is focused on one dramatic, startling event, sudden as a bolt of lightning, sharp as the tip of a sword: the bodily return of Jesus Christ, and with that, the renewal of all things.

Now I know—even to mention the return of Christ gets everyone a little twitchy. There have been so many alleged “comings,” and so many embarrassing disappointments (I can recall at least three in my lifetime) we just want to put this part of our faith aside and focus on other things more attractive to our age. We’d much prefer to be about popular things like justice, the dignity of women, and God’s mercy. But the historic church held the return of Christ to be so central to the Christian faith it cannot be put aside or buried as some peripheral doctrine without losing

Christianity itself. As C.S. Lewis said, “It seems to me impossible to retain in any recognizable form our belief in the Divinity of Christ and the truth of the Christian revelation while abandoning, or even persistently neglecting, the promised, and threatened, Return.”

Jesus himself spoke stern warnings about a particular attitude towards his return:

“Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, ‘My master is staying away a long time.’” (Matthew 24:45-48)

Pause, and let that sink in—“my master is still a long ways off” is the *forbidden* attitude. And the one most of you probably have embraced. We are urged to watch, and be ready. Your watchfulness is further commanded with the warning that he will return at exactly the hour when everyone thinks he’s still a long ways off. Like this hour right now, or any one close to it.

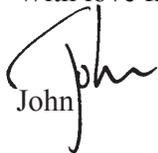
“But *every* age has thought that Jesus was about to show up. Even Paul did—and he was wrong. Who knows when it could be; it might take another thousand years.” It sounds so reasonable... except for the fact that this is the forbidden attitude. Yes, every age has thought that Christ would return any moment, and well they should. They were right to do so because “any moment” could have been their moment. They were right to have expected his return because they were commanded to by Christ himself. They were wise to do so because it is also the *antidote* to so many harmful things; when the “wicked servant” embraces the posture that his master is still far off, he turns his heart towards the indulgences of this world, trying to slake his kingdom thirst with everything within reach.

As we draw closer to the Day itself, the Church begins to turn its focus from “heaven” to the coming kingdom, the restoration of all things. I can guarantee you one thing, friends—we are closer now than we have ever been before. There is every reason to expect to hear that trumpet blast any day. If what this world is going through right now does not count as birth pangs, I honestly don’t know what will.

Jesus promised he would come as our Redeemer, and he came; we celebrate that at Christmas. It reminds us he keeps his word. Jesus promised he would return. Advent season allows us a chance to look forward to his return with hope, and eager expectation. Maybe it will be this Christmas!

Happy Holidays, dear ones.

With love from your Ransomed Heart family.

John

PS. Thank you, friends, for remembering us in your giving, here at the end of a very full year!