

**Apocalypse Now?**  
***Glorious Appearing***  
**September 26, 2021**

Good morning, everyone. I'm so glad you're here on campus or joining us online.

If this is your first time with us or your first time in a long time, you need to know that we are in the middle of a series called ... *Apocalypse Now?*

... because with all the crazy stuff that's going on in the world these days, a lot of people – even non-Christian people – are wondering if we're living in “end times.”

A lot of people are wondering if the world is about to end for one reason or another.

But the reason *we're* talking about it in this series is because, according to Jesus (and the

Hebrew prophets before him and the Apostles after him), God has appointed a day and time when the world as we know it *will* come to an end.

And they were very concerned that those who believe would not only be aware of that fact; but that we would have some idea of what it would be like and what the signs would be that the end is near.

And when Jesus and the prophets and the Apostles talked about “the end” it wasn’t just to pass along theological and eschatological data. There was an urgency of “this could happen at any moment” ... so be aware and be ready and be hopeful.

I remember not long after I became a Christian – I was in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade – sensing that urgency.

We had this song we used to sing in youth group – maybe some of you sang it or have heard of it.

Life was filled with guns and war  
And everyone got trampled on the floor  
I wish we'd all been ready

There's no time to change your mind  
How could you have been so blind

The Father spoke the demons dined  
The Son has come and you've been left  
behind  
You've been left behind  
You've been left behind.<sup>i</sup>

There was an urgency and a finality to the way  
we thought about and were taught about the  
Apocalypse – and rightly so.

In fact, the two things I remember most about  
my youth group from a teaching point of view  
had to do with the end times and with sex.

**The sex talks were summed up in one basic**

**idea: *Don't have it till you get married ...***

... which is not only biblical but just common sense if you'll just think about it for more than 10 seconds.

**And the end-times talks were *also* summed up in one basic idea: *it's gonna' happen really soon.***

Of course, when you combine those two ideas, it's obvious why pretty much all of us in that group were constantly thinking ...

**“I really hope I get to have sex before the end times!”**

Some of you know what I'm talking about. It was a huge anxiety!

Anyway, we're talking in this series about the end times and if you missed the first two messages, you can always go back and watch, listen to and even read the manuscript in the

media section of our app and also at [www.northheartland.org](http://www.northheartland.org).

## About This Series

Now, before I get into today's message, I need to say that I have a little bit of a hesitancy about it – actually about this whole series.

That's because when I give a message ...

- I'm not talking just to hear the sound of my voice.
- I'm not just spraying out biblical truth and hoping that some of it sticks.
- Nor am I trying to impress anyone with how smart or spiritual I am, because I am neither.

Years ago, after one of my messages, my youngest daughter Janelle said, "daddy you

could be a teacher in a seminary!”

And my first reaction was to take it as a compliment.

Although I didn't say it, I thought “well, yes, my child, you are so right about that.”

But then I had this thought – and I believe it was from the Holy Spirit ...

“Well, yes, but I didn't call you to be a seminary professor. I called you to be a pastor in a church where the average person doesn't have the ability to spend hours and hours reading and studying like a seminary student. I called you to teach *them*.”

It was defining moment for me – a realization that my job isn't to teach *the Bible*. It's to teach *people* – real people, with real concerns ... the Bible.

And that may seem like “just semantics” but, to me, there’s a huge difference between the two.

**In one of his letters, the Apostle Paul writes that ...**

*Knowledge puffs up ...*

... meaning the more you know and the more you can talk about what you know ...

- The more arrogant you become
- And the more you look down on people who aren’t as smart or as informed as you are.

... which, quite frankly, is why a lot of seminarians are arrogant know-it-alls.

And I can say that because I was one of them.

**Paul writes that knowledge puffs up ...**

*... but love builds up.” 1*  
*Corinthians 8:1 (NIV)*

To me, that means if what you learn from what I teach makes you smarter and more biblically literate *but* doesn't lead you (and me) to love God and others more, it's just a bunch of noise.

Anyway, the reason I tell you this is because in this series I've been giving you a lot of biblical data. And I'm going to give you even more today.

And I'm slightly concerned about that because the walk-out-the-door application isn't as direct as it is in most of my other messages.

However, if you're a Christian – you're a believer in and follower of Jesus – you need to understand these things, because these things are the fulfillment of that “living hope” we just sang about.

**One New Testament writer sums it up like**



**this:**

*Christ, having been offered once  
to bear the sins of many ...*

... which is referring to his first coming ... his  
first appearance ...

*Christ will appear a second time,  
not to deal with sin but to save  
those who are eagerly waiting  
for him. Hebrews 9:28 (NIV)*

**Paul writes that we are ...**

*Waiting for the blessed hope—  
the appearing of the glory of our  
great God and Savior, Jesus  
Christ. Titus 2:13 (NIV)*

And if you're a Christian, knowing about that  
"appearing" and looking forward to it –  
experiencing the hope that it inspires – *does*  
*have* a huge walk-out-the-door impact on your  
life (and on mine).

And if you're not a Christian <> ...

If you're not a Christian, I hope that what we're talking about in this series will help you understand a little bit more of *what* we Christians are hoping for and why.

And next week we'll look very specifically at that – what exactly it is we're hoping for after Jesus appears – and I'll just say in advance (as kind of a teaser) that it's *way better* than most of us think, so don't miss it!

But, today, we're going to focus on the “appearing” itself – specifically, what the Jesus and the Apostles had to say about His return.

And with all of that, I think we're almost ready to jump in, but I have to say one more thing before we do.

In my experience as a pastor, I've seen a lot of

Christians get so emotionally attached to a specific interpretation of what the Bible says about the end times ...

... that if someone presents a different idea as to how it's all going to go down (even if that idea has just as much biblical and historical support as our own), they tend to feel *really threatened by it*.

That's what happened to me when I went to seminary many years ago.

It was a real shock to learn that the "big names" in Christian theology through the centuries (like Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Wesley) had a view that was much different from the *Left Behind* scenario I had learned as a teenager.

It was real shock to learn that what I had been taught was (in the light of 2,000 years of Christian theology) a very *new* interpretation

and that maybe, *just maybe*, it was not the most accurate interpretation.

And it actually made me mad.

“These liberals aren’t taking the Bible seriously!” I thought to myself ... which is part of that arrogance of seminarians I mentioned earlier.

It’s arrogance because they were as committed to faithful biblical interpretation as anyone. They wanted to get it right, too.

So, I want to encourage you today not to freak out if you hear things that don’t line up with what you’ve always heard or thought or believed.

And you can do that because *the point of the return of Jesus is way more important than the details of how it’s going to happen.*

Let me say that again - *the point of the return of Jesus is way more important than the details of how it's going to happen.*

And we'll talk more about that point, or points, later.

So, let's get into it.

## **Big Ideas**

As I thought about how to present this it occurred to me that the best way might be to define some of the key events that seem to stand out as you look at the big picture.

If you took everything that was written in the New Testament and you tried to sort through it all, you would notice that six big ideas, six big concepts and events keep showing up.

**1. First is “The Day of the Lord” – the time when God returns to judge the world and set**

**things right.**

This was prophesied long, long ago by Zephaniah and Daniel and others and then picked up on by Jesus and Paul and, and again by the writer of the book of Revelation.

**2. Second is the “Age to Come” – which describes time when the world is renewed and set to what it should be.**

A third big idea that comes up over and over is ...

**3. The “Tribulation” – a period of intense persecution of believers ...**

... as well as signs and wonders (miraculous things from God and Satan both).

We talked about this a little bit last Sunday.

In the tribulation, the whole world will be deceived into following and even worshipping

“the Man of Lawlessness” or “the Man of Sin” as well as receiving the Mark of the Beast as described in Revelation.

Fourth concept, fourth big idea is:

**4. “His Appearing” ... which is another way of saying the visible return of Christ ...**

... when Jesus literally shows up on the earth again for all to see.

Fifth big idea is ...

**5. The “Rapture” – the lightning-quick resurrection and gathering of deceased and living Christ-followers in the air.**

Paul wrote, “The dead in Christ shall rise first and we who are living shall join them in the clouds with Christ.”

At that point, we will be changed from these old, failing bodies into bodies that are immortal and

incorruptible.

That's what's "the rapture" refers to ... although it should also be noted that the word is not actually *in* the Bible.

We'll come back to that shortly.

One more concept that keeps popping up – actually it pops up in one place and is alluded to in others – is ...

**6. The “Millennium” – a thousand-year reign of Christ that is described primarily in Revelation 20.**

And because this is such a critical piece of the puzzle when it comes to how people fit everything together, let me read you part of the scripture.

John writes:

*I saw an angel coming down out*



*of heaven, having the key to the Abyss [the pit] and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years.*

*He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended.*

*When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth ...  
Revelation 20:1-3,7-8 (NIV)*

Now, here's the thing about these six big ideas: every theological system recognizes that they are somehow important in connection with God's future activity in our world.

Of course, the question is ... how do they all fit

together? When do they happen in relation to one another? What's the sequence?

## **Two Views**

Well, that's the problem.

That's where serious biblical scholars and committed-to-Jesus interpreters diverge.

And it would take hours and hours to go thru all the different opinions on how it will all play out.

**But let me simplify a bit by showing you what pretty much everyone agrees on:**

Tribulation ->

The "Day of the Lord" ->

The "Age to Come"

The basic framework which is found in pretty much every theological system is that there is going to be ...

1. A time of tribulation marked by rebellion and falling away from God, in which the Anti-Christ or the Man of Sin or Man of lawlessness has power over the nations.
2. That will be followed by the Day of the Lord when God returns to judge and set things right.
3. That will be followed by the Age to Come – the time of the renewed, restored, and regenerated world.

That's the basic framework on which almost every eschatological system agrees.

And, if you're a Christian and you can't figure out all where all the other stuff fits, I don't think you should freak out about it. I think you can be confident in that sequence. I think it will inspire hope.

On the other hand, if you have it all figured out – you know *exactly* where the other three big ideas fit ... I think you need to be humble.

And I think you need to take seriously something Paul once wrote to a young pastor ...

**... who was responsible to actually teach people these kinds of things.**

*Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome ...*

*2 Timothy 2:23-24 (NIV)*

And a foolish and stupid argument is being overly dogmatic about something that is without a doubt a secondary issue.

It's secondary because no one's eternal destiny is determined by what they believe about the Rapture or the Millennium.

When Jesus does return, there won't be a test. "Sorry, you got the whole Rapture thing wrong. See ya!"

So, with that in mind, I want to show you the two most prominent views. And I'll give you my assessment and then you can decide for yourself.

Or you can decide *not* to decide. That's your decision.

Ok, the most familiar one is the "Left Behind" view which is more formally known as "dispensational pre-trib pre-millennialism."

And there *will* be a test on that.

Just kidding.

**Here's what this view says about how it all fits together:**

Rapture -> Tribulation (7 years) ->  
“His Appearing” -> Millennium ->  
The “Day of the Lord” ->  
The “Age to Come”

At some point in the future ...

1. Jesus is going to return *invisibly and secretly* to take away the living Christians and the deceased believers into Heaven (that’s the rapture) for seven years, leaving all the unbelievers behind (which is where the title of the books came from – “Left Behind.”)
2. After that, the anti-Christ will deceive the world and God will pour out warnings and judgments during the tribulation.
3. Then Jesus will return again, this time visibly (and with those who have been raptured) to defeat the anti-Christ (and his armies).

4. Then he will bind Satan and Jesus himself will reign on the earth for a thousand years, literally (in the Millennium)
5. Following that, this system says, Satan will be freed for a short time after which he will be permanently defeated and cast into the Lake of Fire (along with Death itself) on “the Day of the Lord.”
6. After that, finally, the Heaven and the Earth will be renewed, restored and regenerated (at the beginning of “The Age to Come”).

The greatest strength of this particular position, in my opinion, is that it tries to reconcile everything as literally as possible (and that’s kind of hard to do).

That’s also a weakness because, as we saw last week, a lot of the language in these passages is intentionally symbolic. (I’ll say more about that in just a minute).

Furthermore, this view depends on Jesus returning twice, once invisibly and one visibly, and most scholars agree that's a pretty big leap for something that isn't explicitly stated by anyone – including Jesus himself.

On the other hand, it does match the pattern of a Jewish wedding which is an allegory Jesus used to describe his second coming.

Before his crucifixion, Jesus told his disciples he was leaving – “I go to prepare a place for you, so that where I am you may also be.”

In a Jewish wedding ...

- The groom would prepare a room in his father's house for his bride.
- Then, when it was finished, he would come unexpectedly to take her away to that



place where they would consummate the marriage (which kind of matches the Rapture).

- Then, at a later time, they would make their public appearance at a great feast in their honor (which is the Appearing).

So, that's the most popular view – at least in American Evangelical Christianity.

*The other prominent view* – and this is the one held by Luther, Calvin, and historic Protestantism and even Catholicism to some extent ...

The other prominent view is called amillennialism (meaning “without a millennium”) because it holds that the thousand years of Jesus reigning in Revelation 20 isn't meant to be a literal length of time.

It's a metaphor. It's just a way of saying “a long,

long time.”

**And that metaphor is used in other scriptures, such as 2 Peter 3:8, which says**

...

*With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.            2*  
*Peter 3:8 (NIV)*

Think about that.

Peter's not saying that a thousand years is *literally equivalent* to one day for the Lord. He's saying it's *like* a day. It's a metaphor.

It means “a really, really long time to us is like a really, really short time to God.”

**So here's the picture according to amillennialism.**

Millennium -> Tribulation ->

[Rapture | “His Appearing” | The “Day of the

Lord”] ->

The “Age to Come”

1. When Jesus was raised from the dead and ascended into Heaven, he *was* established as King ... which means that the millennium – the reign of Jesus – has *already* begun.

This, according to this view, is what Revelation chapter 20 is about. Satan’s power has been limited for a season so that the gospel can be preached to the whole world ... which obviously, takes a very, very long time.

2. But once that has happened, there will be a period of time (the Tribulation) during which the anti-Christ will severely persecute Christians all over the world.
3. And then, when it seems all hope is lost, Jesus will return. His “appearing” will be seen by everyone all over the world (which isn’t too hard to imagine anymore with the advances

in technology).

But there won't be a seven year or thousand-year delay in the middle of everything as the Left Behind view teaches.

When Jesus appears, deceased believers will be raised to life and joined by the living believers in the clouds (which is the Rapture).

But, instead of going off with Jesus to Heaven for seven years, they and Jesus will immediately return to earth where Jesus will judge the anti-Christ, Satan, and all of the living and dead (which is the Day of the Lord).

4. And then, finally, according to this view, the long-promised "Age to Come" will begin.<sup>ii</sup>

Now, there are many things I like about this particular view (besides the fact that it's been the majority teaching of the church since the

beginning) but, in the interest of time, I'll limit myself to only two.

What I like most is that it takes seriously the fact that Satan literally was defeated on the cross and in Jesus' resurrection from the dead ...

... and that Jesus is *already* reigning, which is the clear teaching of the New Testament.

"I have been given all authority over Heaven and Earth," he said to his disciples as he was returning to his Father. "Now, go tell that to the rest of the world."

And, in fact, *that was* the basic proclamation of early Christianity – that *Jesus* was Lord and not Caesar!

*That's* what got Christians killed – not that they believed Jesus was their savior or had risen from the dead.

Furthermore, from the very beginning Jesus told them that his Kingdom was *already* breaking into this world. In fact, that *was* the good news – the Gospel – that they (and we) were to believe.

So, first of all, I think this particular view matches up better with Jesus' teaching and the proclamation of the Gospel than the Left Behind view.

The second thing I like about it – and to me, this is huge ... is that it's more consistent with how the original audience would have understood the meaning of the passage that most directly speaks about the Rapture ...

... specifically, Paul's first letter to the Thessalonian Christians (which is actually an expansion of what he had written in other letters to the Corinthians and the Philippians).

**He wrote ...**

*According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming [Parousia] of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.*

In other words, something is going to happen to the deceased believers before it happens to the living believers.

**And here it is:**

*For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.*

*After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.*

*1 Thessalonians 4:15-17*

*(NIV)*

... which is where “the Rapture” idea comes from.

Now, when you and I read that with no historical context, it sounds like the Rapture is Jesus is taking all Christians – living or dead – away to Heaven.

But if you lived in Thessalonica in the first century, that’s not at all what you would have thought.

You would have had a completely different take because you would have understood that the Greek word “Parousia” was often used to describe the coming of an emperor.<sup>iii</sup>

... which, when it happened, was such a big deal that coins were often struck to commemorate it as marking the beginning of a new age.<sup>iv</sup>



And, from the historical record, we know Thessalonica experienced at least two “Parousia” in the first century – so the people reading Paul’s letter would have instantly understood what he was saying.

Here’s how a Parousia worked:

- The emperor’s entourage would be heralded by the sound of a loud trumpet in the distance.
- Then the call would go out throughout the city to be prepared.
- As the emperor approached the city, he would pay his respects to the dead at the graveyard just outside the main entrance.
- Then everyone in the city would go out to meet him in a huge celebration.
- And they would all come back into the city

where there would be acclamations, speeches, petitions, gifts, and festivities.

- And the emperor would see the great work that had been done in advance to prepare for his coming.

With that image in mind, it's clear that Paul is communicating that the true King, Jesus, is going to be met by a welcoming crowd when he approaches the earth.

But Jesus would be much greater than any Caesar. When the emperor visited the cemetery, nothing would happen.

When Jesus comes, graves are going to open and the dead will be resurrected and they, too, will experience the celebration of his glorious appearing.

It's quite a vision.

And you can see why Paul ends this section of the letter with, “we’re *all* going to be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words!”

## **The Little Picture**

Now, again, my point in all of this is not to be dogmatic about which view is the right view. Obviously, I lean towards the amillennial position but you can study and decide for yourself.

Or not because I know that, after all I’ve said today, some of you are thinking, “My goodness, Rick, there’s *no way* I’m wading into something this complex and confusing!

“Why is it so hard to figure out the details of what’s going to happen – beyond ‘the big three’ that everyone agrees on?”

*That answer is easy.*

**The reason it's so hard and complex and confusing is because we're asking a question the Bible never tries to answer.**

We're asking a question that Paul and Peter and John – and even Jesus – were not even considering.

We want to take all 318 passages that talk about the second coming and put them together like a puzzle.

We want the big picture.

**We want to know how does it all fit together?**

That's not an unreasonable question. It's just not the question being asked and answered in the scripture.

This is why it's so important to understand that

the Bible – specifically the New Testament – *is* the Word of God but it's not a magic book of answers to all of our questions.

It's the Word of God but it's the Word of God to *other people* before it's the Word of God to *us*.

Almost every scripture we've talked about so far in this series – including the Book of Revelation last week – is part of a letter written to address a specific concern of a specific group of people in a specific place and a specific time.

And we just don't have enough information about those specifics to make it all fit as nicely as we want into a big picture.

However, what we *do* have is enough information – and this is really the point of the whole thing ...

What we *do* have is enough information about those specific situations to see the little picture.

And for most of us who are Christians, that's all we need.

Rick, what do you mean by "the little picture"?

I mean questions that you and I think about and wonder about that don't have anything to do with the big sweeping arc of "eschatological history" (so to speak) ...

... questions that have to do with living right now in light of the fact that Jesus is coming back someday.

For instance, let's take the one that we've just read about.

The reason Paul tells the Thessalonians that they "certainly won't precede those who have fallen asleep" is that they thought Jesus was coming back immediately and they were worried about family and friends who had already died.

**“What about them, Paul? Are they going to miss out when Jesus comes back?”**

“Is my mom going to miss out?”

“No, she won’t” Paul was saying. “Jesus isn’t like the emperor. When he appears, he’s bringing her out of the grave and she’ll be part of the welcoming committee along with you.”

“So be encouraged. Don’t grieve like those who have no hope.”

That’s the little picture.

And some of us today need that little picture.

Here’s another question the Thessalonians were asking.

**“Have we missed it? Has it already happened?”**

When you read Pauls' second letter to them, apparently, there had been some prophecy or maybe even a letter forged to look like Paul had written that said that the end was already here.

And Paul says "No, remember what I told you when I was with you. It's not going to happen until the man of lawlessness (or the anti-Christ) has been revealed."

And that hasn't happened yet, so you haven't missed it.

I think it's interesting that Paul didn't say "the rapture hasn't happened yet" as his proof that the end was still to come.

But that's the little picture and I think some of us might need to see that today.

We're so concerned and worried about all that's going on in the world – is it happening right now? – so we need Paul's answer to them.



Not until the anti-Christ is revealed and obvious do you even need to think about the tribulation!

Here's another concern of that same group. (Apparently, they had a lot of problems!)

**“If Jesus is coming back soon and it's all going to end, do I really need to do anything?”**

... other than maybe pray and worship and read my Bible.

I mean, it's kind of pointless, right? It's like when you're in school studying for a test when you know you're going to have a snow day.

That's the little picture.

And I think some of us might need that picture today because we're sitting around (spiritually speaking) doing nothing other than hoping that the Rapture will come and take us away from all

of this.

You know what Paul's answer was? Actually, he had two.

One – whoever will not work should not eat.

In other words, if you're a Christian and you're able to work, sponging off the government or even the church instead of working is not acceptable. So, get busy.

I think some of us might need to hear that today.

Paul's second answer had to do with the idea of Parousia – and we'll talk more about this in two weeks. Remember that part of the emperor's visit was to see what they people had done to make their city better.

And the analogy is ... there's an expectation from Jesus that, if you're a Christian, you're going to be about His business until He returns.

It matters to him.

So, again, get busy serving the Lord.

## Conclusion

And the list could go on of the little pictures that are painted – the questions that have to do with living everyday life in the light of the return of our King, Jesus.

*Why the delay? Why hasn't Jesus come back yet?*

Peter answers that one. God is patient and wants everyone to change their mind about him so that they can be saved.

*We are being sorely persecuted for our faith. Has God forgotten us?*

John answers that one in the book of Revelation.

In spite of what it might look like, God is building His church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. The next great event in history is the return of Jesus Christ to conquer and destroy the devil and to make all things new

Friends, we might not see the how the big picture fits together but there are so many little pictures that can be of help and encouragement.

And I pray that you will be encouraged as you look forward to the blessed hope of his glorious appearing.

Let's pray.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> From I Wish We'd All Been Ready, by Larry Norman

<sup>ii</sup> [www.mountainretreatorg.net/eschatology/amil5.html](http://www.mountainretreatorg.net/eschatology/amil5.html)

<sup>iii</sup> The following is adapted from <http://makingtalmidim.blogspot.com/2016/07/1-thessalonians-parousia.html>

<sup>iv</sup> <http://graceandknowledge.faithweb.com/rapture2.html>