

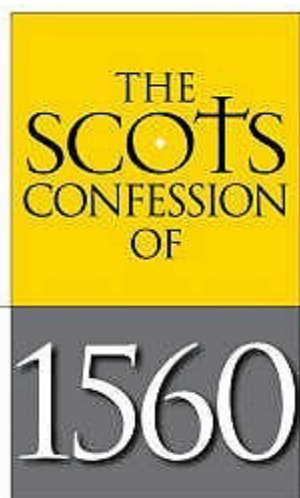
## ***He's Coming Back!***

*I Thessalonians 4: 13-18*

**First Presbyterian Church  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**Reformation Sunday, October 31, AD 2021  
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The Scot's Confession of Faith from 1560 reads like a brush fire. John Knox was the principle author. His team put the document together in four days. Yet it has stood the test of centuries. You can feel the passion and the fire of a nation stepping into a new day of faith in Christ based on Scripture alone. The Scot's Confession gives great importance to the return of Jesus, which is our topic from Thessalonians today. There remains one more crucial event in the career of Jesus yet to be enacted. He will return as Sovereign Lord to set all things right. Here's what Knox wrote. Listen to how the return of Jesus gives hope for justice, courage for persecution and warning of accountability:

We believe that the same Lord Jesus shall visibly return for this Last Judgment as he was seen to ascend. And then, we firmly believe, the time of refreshing and restitution of all things shall come, so that those who from the beginning have suffered violence, injury, and wrong, for righteousness' sake, shall inherit that blessed immortality promised them from the beginning. But, one the other hand, the stubborn, disobedient, cruel persecutors, filthy persons, idolaters, and all sorts of the unbelieving, shall be cast into the dungeon of utter darkness, where their worm shall not die, nor their fire be quenched. The remembrance of that day, and of the Judgment to be executed in it, is not only a bridle by which our carnal lusts are restrained but also such inestimable comfort that neither the threatening of worldly princes, nor the fear of present danger or of temporal death, may move us to renounce and forsake that blessed society which we, the members, have with our Head and only Mediator, Christ Jesus: whom we confess and avow to be the promised Messiah, the only Head of his Kirk, our just Lawgiver, our only High Priest, Advocate, and Mediator.

Can't you feel the fire? This was no tepid faith. This was life-changing, life-commanding faith that Christ Jesus is the center of reality, the one who matters

most. His return is great news for those who have suffered injustice, abuse, persecution, abandonment and any other way of being crushed. His return raises the sharp fear of accountability. Things will not always stay the same. All I am, have done or failed to do will come to light. And his return gives us the courage to withstand anything the world throws at us, knowing the power of bosses and rulers is only temporary. With Knox's words ringing in our ears, let's look at three ideas from our passage this morning.



1) *We do not want you to grieve as those without hope.* Paul has information for this young church. People in their fellowship had died. As people from a Greek/Roman culture, they had inherited a bleak view of death. There was great fear that there was nothing more after this life. Or if there was more, it was not an existence to be desired. They worried that their beloved fellow believers were lost

forever to them. So Paul sent them news of the great hope that we have in Christ.

What a difference there is between grieving with hope and grieving without hope. This is where atheism so colossally lets us down. You stand graveside and look only into a void. This death really happened. There is nothing more. Like a little boy who suddenly realizes he is lost in a crowd and does not know where he is. Like someone who just had a brick dropped on her head. The pagans of Paul's time were terrified of death. And all their grief for loved ones who died was laced with the personal fear: what will happen to me? The full stop of death horrifies.

So Paul reminds them of the central core of their faith. We believe that Jesus died and rose again. The answer to grieving without hope is not found in myself. It's found in the events of Jesus who was gruesomely crucified, wrapped tightly in burial cloths, then sealed away behind a massive stone. He was done. Until on the third day his Father sent the Spirit to raise him from the dead. Jesus lives. And he said, "Because I live, you also will live" (Jn. 14). Paul elsewhere wrote that we "await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him to subject all things to himself" (Phil. 3: 21). Our hope that those who die in Christ are not lost depends on the reality of Jesus' resurrection. Our faith is coordinated with the resurrection. What Jesus has in his rising, we will have.

Paul tells them more. The risen Jesus will return to earth. And he will bring with him those who have died. When Christ returns the dead and the living in Christ will be reunited. We won't have to wait to see those we have lost. They're coming back with Jesus! So grieve this separation. Love creates the pain of being parted. It's supposed to hurt. But not to ruin us. For we have hope. Hope that Christ who died is Christ who rose is Christ who will come again.

2) *The Lord will descend...the dead in Christ will rise first...then we who are left will be caught up together with them.* Paul describes an ear-splitting event, a meeting of overwhelming glory where Jesus and his people, both dead and alive, are reunited in his triumphal return. Of course words fail us here. That the language seems impossible and exaggerated does not mean the reality is less than what is described. The reality is more. More glorious than we can say. It will be even more wonderful than these words communicate. But let's look closely at the words and see where they take us. The Lord will descend with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel and the sound of the last trumpet.



On this Sunday when we celebrate the Scottish heritage of faith, I think about hiking along the shores of Loch Morar, the deepest loch in Scotland. The further you get from the village, the more peaceful and mystical it feels to be on a path above the water but below the mountains. It feels like the busy world of people has

vanished away. I get lost in a reverie. And then suddenly the sky splits open with a sonic boom. A scream of engines has ripped the air apart. I duck instinctively, heart pounding, totally startled, ready to hit the ground in terror. Military jets training over the remote highlands have just passed, so fast I can't see them. But so loud as to command total attention. Such will be the return of Jesus with a voice of command. There will be no option but to give this event our full attention.

But that's not even the most fantastic part. Paul says that the dead in Christ will rise. Then we who are left will also rise to meet Jesus and the departed together in the air. Again, words fail us. It can sound absurd. But the limits of language urge us to try on this fantastic picture, knowing that it is not a crude, simplistic picture but rather a pointer to a glorious reality beyond description.



The picture is of a great reunion. The living and the dead meet together as the Lord descends to reign. But the purpose is not first of all a family reunion. This is a mutual welcoming of the king back to his kingdom. The picture is of a great crowd going out to welcome a returning, beloved ruler to his city. Or a family going out to meet a loved one finally home. Think of it from the perspective of arriving at your childhood home after many

years away. In your absence, some who lived in that house have died. As you're driving down your old neighborhood streets, you realize you are carrying with you these grandparents, these parents, these siblings who have departed. You can still see them and hear them. Then as you arrive, full of these memories, before you even turn the car off, you see that people have come out to welcome you. Cheers. Hugs. Tears. Dog's barking and dancing. Dad's grabbing your suitcase. Mom's wiping her hands on her apron before throwing her arms around you. She has your favorite foods in the oven. We're all back together again, and you feel like those you carry in your heart and those right in front of you all are all united in this celebration.

So we who are in Christ, either departed or still living in the world, will meet Jesus to welcome him back to the world for which he died and over which he has come to rule. We'll all go out to meet him when he comes. We'll go with him as he returns to subdue evil and usher in the reign of his peace.



3) *So we will always be with the Lord.* This is Paul's conclusion. We, all the believers who have gone before us and all the believers now, will be together with the Lord. Separation is momentary. Reunion in Christ is forever. Curiously, I had trouble finding images of this union. Even in art, we focus so much on individual life in Christ. But Scripture clearly teaches the union of all the church throughout time and space with the Lord Jesus at the

center. Perhaps it's fitting that the best picture I could find is of Jesus blessing the children. For to enter his joy, we must be child-like in our trust. We must be glad to be called to him. For Jesus to be at the center, not ourselves. For us to be a

family whose head is Christ. For eternity not to be about a personal paradise but about the love and worship and delight in being together with Jesus.

And so that final sentence becomes quite a diagnostic for us. *So we will always be with the Lord.* How do you feel about that? How do you feel about being gathered from wherever you are to meet the Lord in his triumphant return? How do you feel about being in his presence always? Do you long to be gathered in his arms? Do you thrill to seeing all things ordered and arranged around the rule of our King Jesus? Are you eager for him to return to set all things right? How do you feel that Paul says So “we”, not “I,” will be with the Lord? Not the “we” of just my favorites, but the we of all who are joined to Jesus, the whole church universal. Does this vision attract you or repel you? Do you trust Jesus to set all things as they should be? Do you long to be with him? This reality calls to you. The fact of his return gave the Scots Presbyterians courage to face every enemy, to recreate a nation. It inspired them to holiness and to hope. Are you with them?