

When Christ Appears

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[0:00] 1 John 2, beginning at verse 28. This is God's word again. And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence! and not shrink from him in shame at his coming.

For if you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him. Over the years, I've read quite a few memoirs and autobiographies. Some of these were written by historical or political figures. Others were written by musicians, artists, authors, and other creative types that we would typically consider famous and successful. And I've come to notice a recurring theme through many, if not most of them. To give you one example, years ago, I read the autobiography of Greg Allman, the front man for the Allman Brothers Band.

And I realized that everyone under a certain age is now thinking, who in the world is the Allman Brothers Band? Well, all you really need to know is that they were a famous rock band in the 70s.

[1:21] Well, Allman, he, if I remember correctly, begins his autobiography by recalling the night that his band was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

This was in the year 1995. And Greg Allman was 47 years old at the time. He had already achieved what so many aspiring musicians spend their lives trying to achieve.

He had money. He had fame. He had sold millions of records. People all over the world knew his name. And he was being honored for a long, successful career.

And yet, he shows up to the induction ceremony, let's just say severely impaired. Why? Well, I think the short answer is hopelessness.

And that is what I have seen over and over again in the stories of so many famous and seemingly successful people. These are people who seem to have everything that our world tells us we need in order to be happy.

[2:25] They have money. They have people who admire them. They have reached the heights of their professional success. These are people who can go almost anywhere, buy almost anything, do almost anything they please.

And yet, so many of them prove to be miserable. Why is that? Well, as you read their stories, it becomes pretty clear, at least if you're looking at it from a biblical worldview.

Ultimately, they are miserable because they don't know Christ. And if they don't know Christ, they remain separated from God.

And if they remain separated from God, they will not have peace. They will not have true joy. And they will not have hope. Now, they may never describe their problem in terms of being separated from God.

They may never even think about God. Instead, they set their hope on the next accomplishment. That is, the next album. The next book. The next tour.

[3:33] The next relationship. The next paycheck. The next experience. Whatever it might be. But what happens once they get it? What happens when they reach that next step?

It's never enough. So, they move on to the next thing. But the next thing doesn't satisfy either. It may give them pleasure for a time. It may provide enough excitement to keep them distracted for a while.

But it doesn't last. They can't hold on to it. But we don't need to read celebrity books to know this, do we? Wasn't that Solomon's experience?

He had it all. He had wealth and power. Worldwide fame. A palace that took thousands of men 13 years to build. Vineyards. Entertainment at the snap of a finger.

Hundreds of wives and concubines. He rarely denied himself anything that his eyes desired. And yet, when he looked back over everything he had accumulated.

[4:38] And everything he had accomplished. What did he say? Behold, all is vanity. And a striving after wind. Have you ever tried to catch the wind?

It's a physical thing. You can feel it. It's strong enough to bend a tree or knock a man to the ground. But what happens when you try to reach out and grasp it in your hand?

You can't do it. It slips right through your fingers. And that's the image that Solomon gives for us concerning life under the sun. That is a life lived apart from God.

You can keep reaching. You can keep grasping. You can keep telling yourself, The next thing will finally be enough. But it slips right through your fingers.

Just like it did every time before it. Job's so-called friend, Bildad. He got many things wrong. But he was right about one thing.

[5:40] He said, The hope of the godless shall perish. If our hope is in anything but God, Of course it will perish. Even if we manage to hang on to the object of our hope For the remainder of our lives, What happens once we die?

The object of our hope dies with us. So Bildad was right. The hope of the godless shall perish. Proverbs says the same thing.

The hope of the righteous brings joy. But the expectation of the wicked will perish. You know, the Christian may suffer terribly in this world.

We may lose our health. Or bury those that we love. Or struggle financially. We may know great disappointment and loneliness And pain and grief.

In fact, the Bible would tell us to expect many of these things. In this world, you will have trouble. Jesus never promised his disciples an easy life. Even so, the Christian possesses something the unbeliever does not have.

[6:51] We have hope. We have real, substantial, eternal hope that cannot perish. Now, to be clear, when the Bible speaks about hope, It does not mean that we...

It does not mean what we usually mean when we use a word like that. We say things like, I hope it doesn't rain tomorrow. And what we mean is, it might rain, or it might not.

We just don't know. However, we'd like to think it won't. But Christian hope is different. Christian hope is a confident expectation of something that God himself has already promised.

And because God cannot lie, because God is faithful, it will come to pass. This is what Hebrews refers to as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul.

It's sure and steadfast because it doesn't anchor the soul to something that is fleeting. Or temporal. If you anchor your soul to, say, your health, well, you can't keep your health forever.

[7:54] We all know that. If you anchor your soul to money, well, you can lose that money. We might even anchor ourselves to many good and wonderful things.

But if those things are by nature temporal, what happens to our hope when those things disappear? Our hope perishes right alongside the object of our hope.

So the Christian throws his anchor beyond this world. Our hope is anchored in the Lord Jesus Christ. And in this passage we've heard read, John wants us to think about the precise moment when that hope finally becomes sight.

This is when Jesus Christ himself will appear. The one whom we have believed without seeing, we will see. The one to whom we have prayed will stand before us.

The Savior whose words we have read, whose death we have preached, whose resurrection we have believed, whose return we have long awaited, he will be back.

[9:02] And John wants us to consider a very serious question. What will that moment be like for you? Will you stand before him in confidence?

Or will you shrink back from him in shame? So John begins here with an exhortation. He says, and now little children, abide in him.

Now, if we were reading this letter from the beginning, that word abide would sound very familiar by this point because John has used it repeatedly. In the preceding verses just before our text, he told us that the truth we heard from the beginning must abide in us.

He told us that the anointing we received from God abides in us. And then he says here, little children, abide in him. Stay with Christ.

Remain with Christ. Make your home in Christ. And do not be tempted to move elsewhere. And this exhortation carries particular weight when we consider what John described earlier in this same chapter.

[10:15] He spoke about people who had once been among the church, but had since abandoned the faith. They went out from us, he says. But they were not of us.

So these are people who had heard the truth. They were sitting on the pews Sunday after Sunday. They had spent enough time among God's people that others in the church apparently regarded them as believers.

But then, they left. They abandoned everything. They were sitting on the church. They were sitting on the church. So when John says, abide in him, this is not merely a pleasant devotional thought, if you will.

There's actually a warning behind it. Do not drift from Christ. Do not move away from the gospel you heard in the beginning and believe.

Don't begin to look elsewhere for peace and joy and hope. This makes me think about myself when I was young. And so many others who grew up in the church.

[11:21] We learned the Bible. We sang the songs. We may have been at one time very enthusiastic about spiritual things, but over time, we began to change.

And it wasn't dramatic. It's usually not dramatic. We don't necessarily wake up one morning and announce, you know what? Well, I no longer believe Christianity is true. I don't believe this Bible. No, it's far more common for us to simply drift. We stop opening the Bible. Prayer becomes rare for us.

Meeting together with the church for worship, well, that's optional. I'll make it when I can. Sin stops bothering us as much as it once did. The things of Christ gradually move toward the edges of life while other things move toward the center.

Maybe we haven't openly denied Christ. If someone asks whether we're a Christian, we might say yes. But Christ has become increasingly distant and increasingly irrelevant in the way that we actually live.

[12:30] Now, if that describes you, listen very carefully to John here. He says, little children, abide in him.

Stop drifting. There's nothing out there for you. Where could you possibly go? In John chapter 6, when so many of the Lord's disciples turned away and no longer followed him, Jesus then turned to the twelve and he asked, do you want to go away as well?

And Peter nailed it when he answered, Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. That's exactly right.

Only Christ has the words of eternal life. Where else could you go? Do you want to go back to chasing the wind? Shall you go back to chasing something you can never catch?

Oh, sure, from a distance. It looks so satisfying. But it can never be. Many of us have been there. In my youth, I left the church to become the next Greg Allman.

[13:40] And where would I be had the Lord not intervened? And let's just say, for argument's sake, I had all the talent and the opportunities to rise as high as the Allman Brothers Band.

Let's say I achieved as much money and fame and professional success as they had. Where would I really be? According to Greg Allman's story, from his own words, I would still be without hope and without God in this world, and I would be miserable, still trying to desperately grasp at everything I could to fill the emptiness.

So John warns us not to drift. Do not go back to that sin that may satisfy you for a night, but it will only accuse you in the morning.

There is no other Savior. There is no other fountain of living water. There is no other righteousness that can cover your guilt. There's no other blood that can cleanse you.

There is no other resurrection that can carry you through death. So abide in Christ. Now, exactly what does that mean, practically?

[14:55] What does it mean to abide in Christ? Well, that's really what John teaches us throughout this entire letter. Clearly, it means more than attending church occasionally.

It means more than knowing the details of Christianity. Those antichrists that he described earlier in the chapter who left the church, they could check those boxes. So what does it mean to abide in Christ?

Well, according to John, it means we believe the truth about Christ. It means we walk in his commandments. It means we love his word.

It means we confess our sin rather than conceal it or excuse it. It means we love the brethren. We love his church. And I believe most importantly, it means we keep looking to Christ.

And maybe I should clarify what that means because we can use phrases like that, look to Christ, trust in Christ so often that we've stopped explaining them.

[15 : 59] I believe looking to Christ means that we stop looking to ourselves and we stop looking to other things apart from Christ as a means to make us acceptable or good enough to God.

To look to Christ is to confess that you are a sinner and your sin deserves nothing less than God's wrath. It is to believe what God has revealed about his son, that Jesus Christ is the eternal son of God who became man and who obeyed where we have disobeyed and bore our judgment on the cross and was buried and rose again from the dead.

It is to entrust yourself to him, not merely believe the facts about him, even the demons know the facts about him, but to trust him, to rest the entirety of your life and your soul and your eternity on him alone.

It is to come to him with nothing in your hands and in effect say, if Christ does not save me, I cannot be saved. If his righteousness is not enough for me, I have no righteousness.

If his blood does not cleanse me, I remain guilty. If his resurrection does not give me life, I am a dead man or a dead woman. It is to say, apart from Christ, I will never find lasting peace and I cannot have hope.

[17 : 33] So, whether you believe you are a Christian who has drifted from Christ or you are someone who might consider himself a Christian yet bears no fruit of everlasting life, or you are someone who has never believed, the answer is ultimately the same.

Come to Christ. Confess your sin. Stop defending it. Stop nursing it. Stop telling yourself, I'll deal with it eventually. Stop chasing the wind.

Come to Christ. And once you are in Christ, John says, abide in him. Stay in him. Look nowhere else because you've already anchored your soul to the only hope that can last.

But John doesn't stop there. Why does he urge us to abide? He says, so that when he appears, we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming.

In short, the Lord Jesus Christ, who ascended into heaven some 2,000 years ago, will return personally, visibly, bodily, and gloriously.

[18 : 52] Now the first time he came, most of the world didn't even notice. A young woman in Bethlehem gave birth. A few shepherds from nearby fields came to see him.

A handful of wise men traveled from the east eventually. Herod, he heard some frightening rumors. But Caesar, he didn't stop what he was doing.

The Roman Empire did not tremble at the birth of Christ. In fact, most of Israel seems to have slept through the night completely unaware that anything had happened. Jesus, he came in humility.

He allowed sinful men to mock him. He allowed the Roman soldiers eventually to strike him. They pressed thorns into his head. They stripped him and nailed him to the cross.

And meanwhile, crowds of people, they walked past and they laughed at the Son of God hanging there. But here's the thing. That will not happen again.

[19 : 51] When he comes the second time, no one will mistake who he is. No one. Paul says, the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command and with the voice of the archangel and with the sound of the trumpet.

We won't miss this. The Lord himself will descend. A cry of command sounds throughout the world. The trumpet of God is heard. Graves that have held people for thousands of years will surrender their dead.

Paul says, the dead in Christ will rise first. Then every believer who is still alive will be caught up in the air with them. We won't miss it. Peter says, the heavens will pass away with a roar.

Jesus says, the Son of Man will come in his glory and all the angels with him. Revelation tells us explicitly, every eye will see. So this will be by no means some private religious experience known only by a handful of people.

At that moment, at his return, Christ will tear away in an instant every illusion under which this world now lives. Today, people can ignore Jesus.

[21:08] They can ridicule him. They can use his name as a curse word. They can spend 80 years living as though God doesn't even exist. They can build their houses and make their money and raise their children and take their vacations and enjoy their hobbies and never give one serious thought to the one who gives them every breath.

But on the day the Lord returns, they will not. They cannot ignore him any longer. but this day will be a little different for believers.

For those abiding in Christ, when he appears, the long war against sin ends. Death itself ends. The bodies of God's children rise imperishable.

And John tells us in the very next chapter, really only a few sentences after our text, we know that when he appears we shall be like him because we shall see him as he is.

Can you imagine that? You will see him and not by faith, not through a sermon, not through the words printed on the pages of your Bible. You will see the face of Jesus Christ.

[22:24] The Savior whom you have loved without seeing will finally stand before you. and you will never sin again.

You will never have a doubt ever again. You can never grow cold toward him again. You will never confess another sin because there will be no more sin to confess.

You will never attend another funeral and to that I say praise God. You will never receive a diagnosis from a doctor. You will never hear another terrible piece of news.

You will never watch someone you love fade away. You will never say goodbye again. The dwelling place of God will be with man and we're told he will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

Death will be no more. Neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore. Is it any wonder that the Apostle Paul describes Christ appearing as our blessed hope God to be clear the return of Christ should not merely occupy a place in our doctrinal statement as Christians.

[23:37] We should love his appearing. We should want nothing more than to see him come. But with his coming John forces a question upon us.

When he appears how will we meet him? And there are only two possibilities he says. Either confidence or shame.

Now there's almost a play on words here that we can't see in our English translations of the Bible. The word John uses for coming that is the Lord's coming and the word he uses for confidence sound very similar in the Greek.

And as I've already said the Lord's coming will be bold so loud so incredible that no one on this earth dead or alive will miss it. And then when John talks about believers or those abiding in Christ having confidence when he comes that carries the idea of boldness.

Freedom. Openness. So the idea here is that when the Lord comes in his boldness those abiding in Christ can meet him with boldness.

[24:58] Obviously the contrast to confidence is shame. Not everyone will stand before him in confidence. Not everyone will be excited to see him return.

Some will shrink from him in shame. And those are terrible frightening words. Just imagine seeing Christ come and wanting nothing more than to hide from him.

And the worst part of it is you can't hide. Furthermore there's no time to make things right. This is it. This is the end. We're out of time. You've spent your life avoiding him and now there's nowhere to go.

You kept him at a safe distance. You knew enough about him to know who he was. You heard the sermons. Perhaps you sat in church. Perhaps you even called yourself a Christian but you never actually entrusted yourself to him.

And now he's here. there are no distractions left. There's no phone to pick up or TV to turn on.

[26:10] There's no work to bury yourself in. There's no party to attend. No bottle. No hobby. No next thing. Only Christ the judge.

And you cannot hide from him. Sadly some people seem to imagine that judgment will be little more than the Lord weighing out our good works versus our evil works and deciding which one outweighs the other.

Worse yet many people rather than comparing themselves to the law of God to God's demands compared themselves to other people whom they deem worse.

So of course they think I'll be fine. I'm not that bad. Jesus warned about people who would say to him on that day Lord Lord only to hear him reply I never knew you depart from me.

Evidently these people were not atheists as we think of atheists. They had some connection to religion and they evidently expected Christ to receive them. but he says I never knew you.

[27 : 30] It is possible to attend church without ever truly coming to Christ. We can get very comfortable here in fact.

We can learn to stand and when to sit and we can learn the songs and we can make Christian friends. We may even enjoy very much being around Christians but we may not know Christ. Now I'm not trying to make a tender hearted Christian, a true believer here question whether they are saved and John isn't either. He writes this letter so that you may know as believers that you have eternal life.

But here's the point. Biblical assurance of our salvation is not built on indifference to Christ. If you keep Christ at arm's length you should not comfort yourself merely because you attend church or you call yourself a Christian or your good works outweigh your bad works or you're better than the guy down the street.

Come to Christ. Entrust yourself to him completely. And if you happen to be someone who has walked with the Lord in the past but you have felt yourself wandering away I want you to hear this warning without immediately concluding that every season of backsliding proves that you were never converted.

[28 : 55] Real Christians do stumble. Peter denied Christ. David fell into terrible sin. The question is not whether a Christian can stumble.

The question is whether you can make peace with life apart from Christ. Can you settle there? Can you remain there? if not stop running away? Return to Christ. Jesus says whoever comes to me I will never cast out.

So as we examine ourselves in light of the Lord's second coming and we consider these two potential reactions we could have on that day confidence or shame we might imagine that we hear footsteps coming down the hallway.

now we know who's coming. It's God. It's the Lord of Lords and King of Kings.

[29 : 57] It's the judge of all the earth and we can hear the footsteps. He's approaching and we might think of John as asking us how do you feel at this moment? How do you feel when you hear those footsteps?

You see some people will hear a judge and executioner even coming down the hallway. They're like the death row inmate who's just waiting to be escorted to the execution chamber.

They know they've committed the crime. They're guilty and they're just waiting to receive the just punishment. So when they hear those footsteps they shrink back in shame. But for others the response is very different.

Very different. They don't hear a judge coming or an executioner coming I should say. They're more like children waiting in glad anticipation for their father to come home and walk in the back door. They can't wait to see him burst through the door. They're not hiding from him. Not in the least. They're ready to jump into his arms as soon as he crosses the threshold. And that's the image that John paints for us here.

[31 : 06] Those are the two responses. But someone might ask aren't we all guilty? Don't we all deserve the death penalty? Will we not all stand before the judgment seat of Christ?

Why aren't we all shrinking back in shame? Well we will stand before the judgment seat of Christ but here's the difference. Those who gladly anticipate his arrival those who will stand in confidence at his coming are those for whom the judge himself bore their condemnation.

The one seated on the throne is the one who was nailed to the cross for them. Paul says that for those of us who are in Christ there is now no condemnation.

Yes we are all guilty but there are some who will suppress that truth and there are others who will flee to Christ for refuge. They will make their home in him by faith.

They will abide in him by faith and because they have. They don't hear the footsteps of an executioner coming. They hear the footsteps of a loving father and they excitedly welcome his return.

[32 : 22] In some respects there's a question at the heart of John's letter and the question is this. Who are you? Are you a child of God or are you a child of the devil?

It has to be one or the other. In fact he uses that very language in chapter 3 verse 10 he says by this it is evident who are the children of God and who are the children of the devil.

And even here at the end of chapter 2 for the very first time in this letter John speaks of the new birth. Verse 29 if you know that he is righteous you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him.

Now I said this is the first time John has spoken of the new birth in this letter but it's not the last time he returns to this over and over again. But before we go any further I want you to notice the order of this.

John does not say that everyone who practices righteousness will be born of him. He says everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him.

[33 : 34] In other words birth comes before the new life that follows. And that stands to reason doesn't it? Why do I make this distinction?

Well it's because whether someone is an unbeliever an atheist a nominal Christian a backsliding Christian it really doesn't matter. The natural impulse I think is for us to assume that we must become righteous in order to be accepted by God.

We think if only I do X Y and Z then maybe I'll find peace. Maybe then I can be reconciled to God. Maybe then I can have hope in this world.

In other words we think that practicing righteousness will make us right before God. Well according to John according to Jesus I would say according to the entirety of the Bible that will never work. our righteousness will never make us God's children and that's because our problem runs deeper than bad habits or a lack of good habits.

[34 : 41] A dead man does not need improvement. What does he need? He needs life. So how do we get that life?

Well when we turn to God with a spirit of repentance and a heart of faith believing that he can and will save and we seek his mercy sincerely the prophet Isaiah tells us that he's going to take from us that heart of stone and replace it with a heart of flesh.

He makes the sinner alive together with Christ. He gives us a new nature a new life. He gives us a new birth. And only then can we begin to practice righteousness.

Now someone might argue wait a minute even before my conversion I was able to do some good works. I've known some people who are unbelievers who do good works. Well Hebrews 11 6 says without faith it is impossible to please God.

For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. Now to be clear John is not talking about doing a righteous thing here or there.

[35 : 59] To say we practice righteousness is to say it has become the pattern of our lives. What direction are we actually walking? When we sin do we defend it ignore it or do we confess it?

When God's word exposes us do we fight against his word or do we submit to it? Do we want holiness even when we are frustrated by how far short we still fall?

Do we love what God loves? Do we hate the sin that once ruled over us? I don't know about you but when someone asks me or shows me a baby and asks me who do you think the baby looks like? Mom or dad? dad? My answer is I have no idea. He looks like a baby to me. But ask me again a few months later. Now I can begin to see oh he does look like his father or he does look like his mother.

Ask me five years later and I probably won't have a doubt in my mind. I know who this child belongs to. Of course the resemblance isn't going to be identical. It's not going to be perfect.

[37 : 13] but you can see the family resemblance. It's undeniable. The same is true for the child of God. Those who are born of God who are abiding in him will bear a family resemblance.

That's what John's talking about here. He's not suggesting that if you want to stand with confidence at the Lord's return then you must make yourself righteous. If that's what we think we have it backward.

Do we think obedience can undo disobedience? No, that's not how it works. We need a righteousness that comes from outside of ourselves.

We need a perfect righteousness to please God. We need Christ. So we turn to Christ for life, for new birth, and once we have that life, as we continue to abide in him, we slowly but surely bear a greater family resemblance to God our father.

And as we do, we can look back over the ways that God has changed us and is changing us and the confidence that we will have in the Lord's second coming only grows stronger, the anticipation grows stronger.

[38:33] God and I would regret if I did not read what John says next in this letter. At the start of chapter three, he writes, see, or behold, what kind of love the Father has given to us that we should be called children of God.

And so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be as he is.

And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. Notice that last line. Everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

John says there are only two ways to meet Christ when he returns, either in confidence or in shame. And what I want you to notice is that biblical prophecy always comes with exhortations. In other words, we're not told about the future, in this case, the Lord's second coming, simply to respond with something like, oh, that's interesting. Even the book of Revelation says, blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.

[40:04] So John says, Christ is coming, and the logical thing for us to ask is, okay, in light of that, what do we do now?

Christ is coming. How should I speak to my wife today? Christ is coming. What should I do with this sin that I've been hiding?

Christ is coming. How should I spend my money? Christ is coming. Should I forgive that person? Christ is coming.

Should I keep drifting farther from the church, farther from the word of God, farther from prayer?

Christ is coming. Should I keep postponing repentance?

You see, we should live every day, every moment in fact, in the light of the knowledge of the Lord and His coming back and that He is coming like a thief in the night.

[41:03] We don't know when it will be. For some, this will be the most terrifying moment they have ever known. Everything they will have trusted in will vanish All at once.

Money won't matter. Reputation Won't matter. Degrees won't matter. Political power won't matter. Every earthly distinction that seems so important now will collapse beneath the weight of Christ's glory.

The hope of the godless will perish. Oh, but Christians, what will that day mean for you?

Your waiting will be over. Your warfare will be over. over. The temptation that has followed you for 50 years will be over.

The disease that weakened your body will be over. The grief that you carried for years will be over.

The battle that you fought against the flesh will be over.

[42:08] Look up. The one who is coming in the clouds, he's not your enemy. He's your savior. For those of us born of God, abiding in Christ, let our prayer be, come Lord Jesus.

Come quickly, in fact. Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy to the only God our Savior through Jesus Christ our Lord be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority before all time and now and forever. Amen.