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Title: "OIC Statement of Faith, Part 7: We believe in the personal return of the Lord Jesus Christ."

Key verses:

John 14:2-3 (NASB) – "In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. <sup>3</sup> And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also."

1 John 3:3 (NASB) – "And every one who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure."

Christ is risen!

As you heard in my messages last month, in many churches, Christians continue to use this greeting "Christ is risen" for several weeks after Easter Sunday – Resurrection Day. This is the Easter season and many Christians continue to use this greeting from Easter Sunday until Ascension day, the day in the Christian calendar that commemorates the ascension of Christ into heaven. Well, in the Christian calendar, this coming Thursday is Ascension Day – forty days after Easter. So that means that we are coming to the conclusion of the Easter season. As I did last month, I would like to focus briefly on the ascension of Christ as a way of transitioning into the main topic of today's message, which is a look at Paragraph 7 of our church's Statement of Faith. That paragraph declares our belief in the personal return of Jesus Christ for His people.

Let's read some verses in Acts chapter 1 about the ascension of Christ. In my last sermon last month, I read some of these verses for you, but not the whole story.

Acts 1:1-3 (NASB) – "The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, <sup>2</sup> until the day when He was taken up to heaven, after He had given orders by the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom He had chosen. <sup>3</sup> To these He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of things regarding the kingdom of God."

For forty days after His resurrection, Jesus occasionally appeared to the disciples and He "spoke of things regarding the kingdom of God."

And here is what happens at the end of those forty days. Acts 1:9 (NASB) – "And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were watching, and a cloud took Him up, out of their sight." *And a cloud took Him up, out of their sight.* This is what we refer to as the Ascension of Christ.

And what are those words that Jesus spoke to them a moment earlier? He was once again commissioning them to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Acts 1:4-5 (NASB) – "Gathering them together, He [Jesus] commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, 'Which,' He said, 'you heard of from Me; <sup>5</sup> for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now'."

That baptism with the Holy Spirit occurs ten days later, in Acts chapter 2, on the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descends on the Christians gathered in the Upper Room.

Let's continue Jesus' final words to the disciples in Acts 1:6-8 (NASB) – “So, when they had come together, they began asking Him, saying, ‘Lord, is it at this time that You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?’<sup>7</sup> But He said to them, ‘It is not for you to know periods of time or appointed times which the Father has set by His own authority;<sup>8</sup> but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and Samaria, and as far as the remotest part of the earth’.”

I notice in verse 6 that the disciples are still anticipating the restoration of the kingdom to Israel. The Jews had been expecting the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies concerning the coming of a Messiah, a Son of David, who would reestablish the kingdom. The ministry of Jesus had begun the process of fulfilling those prophecies, and now the disciples are asking if that is going to happen next. Actually, His reply is quite interesting. He tells them that the time frame for the restoration of the kingdom is not for them to know. He doesn't want them to focus on that. Jesus wants His disciples to focus on the next chapter of God's plan of redemption for mankind. He tells them to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit comes upon them and then they will be His witnesses from Jerusalem and Judea to the ends of the earth. That is the task that Jesus gave to His disciples and which the church continues today. Last month I quoted for you the Great Commission in Matthew 28, where Jesus tells His followers to make disciples of all nations, baptizing and teaching new disciples to observe all of His commandments. We have inherited that commission and that is the main task for the church today.

Let's read Acts 1:9-11 (NASB) – “And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were watching, and a cloud took Him up, out of their sight.<sup>10</sup> And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, then behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them,<sup>11</sup> and they said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven’.”

*This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.*

That is basically the topic of today's sermon on Paragraph 7 of the OIC Statement of Faith: the return of Jesus, the personal return of Jesus to this earth for His people. He Himself will return ... in person ... in the same way He departed: in the clouds. He will return in the clouds.

This is a messianic notion. In fact, it is a divine notion – coming in the clouds. This draws on pictures from the Old Testament, which Jesus had spoken of both in His famous “Olivet Discourse” and during the trial before His crucifixion.

Let's read Mark 14:61-62 (NKJV) during the trial of Jesus in front of the Sanhedrin – “But He kept silent and answered nothing. Again the high priest asked Him, saying to Him, ‘Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?’<sup>62</sup> Jesus said, ‘I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven’.”

*Coming with the clouds of heaven.* Jesus is alluding to Daniel 7:9-14. I described this in detail in my January 1st sermon this year and I recommend you take another look at it – you can find the sermon on our website. At His trial before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish leaders that were gathered there recognized that Jesus was claiming divinity by attributing this phrase to Himself, as the next two verses in Mark 14 state.

[*Unspoken in the sermon:* Mark 14:63-64 (NKJV) – “Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, ‘What further need do we have of witnesses? <sup>64</sup> You have heard the blasphemy! What do you think?’ And they all condemned Him to be deserving of death.”]

Jesus will return. That has been the hope of the church for these past 2,000 years. Now, I would like to read Paragraph 7 of our Statement of Faith, which is the focus of today’s message. Actually, I would like to read both Paragraphs 7 and 8, since both of them relate to our future expectation and I will be speaking on Paragraph 8 in my message next week.

Paragraph 7:

We believe in the personal return of the Lord Jesus Christ, and that this ‘blessed hope’ has a vital bearing on the personal life and service of the believer. John 14:2-3, 1 John 3:2-3.

The personal return of the Lord Jesus – it is His very person who will return. This won't be a spiritual or an invisible return of Jesus Christ. It will be the same man with the same body as the disciples watched go into heaven.

Paragraph 8:

We believe in the bodily resurrection of all the dead: of the believer to everlasting blessedness and joy with their Lord, and the unbeliever to judgment and everlasting conscious punishment. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, Hebrews 9:27.

Next week, we will be looking at the final judgment and the eternal destiny of believers and of unbelievers. That can be an unpleasant subject, but we’ll be taking a look at that next week.

Let’s return to Paragraph 7. We have here a statement on the personal return of the Lord Jesus Christ. And this is called a “blessed hope” that we have. Because Christians are expecting the return of our Lord, this has a very important influence on how we live our personal lives right now ... *an important influence on how we live our personal lives.* And on *how we serve* – this blessed hope influences our service. We read in the gospels and in the epistles how important it is to be serving others and serving the church.

Paragraph 7 cites two scripture passages: John 14:2-3 and the 1st Epistle of John 3:2-3.

John 14:2-3 (NASB) – “In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. <sup>3</sup> And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.”

Jesus tells the disciples that He is going to His Father’s house. He is going to heaven, and while there He is going to be preparing a place for them, a place to dwell. Then He tells them that He will come back to them and receive them to Himself. Jesus will come back for us. And we will dwell with Him – we will be together with Jesus.

Let's look at 1st John 3:2-3 (NASB) – “Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is.<sup>3</sup> And every one who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.”

Verse 3 here connects to what our Statement of Faith says about our blessed hope having a vital bearing on how Christians live their lives. I will return to that thought later.

Let's look at verse 2. It says that we are children of God and that when Jesus returns – when He “appears” – we shall be like Him, “because we shall see Him just as He is.” This is one of the reasons why many Christians are expecting that in heaven we will have bodies that are much like the body Jesus had after His resurrection. This idea is bolstered by some verses we read in 1st Corinthians chapter 15, one of my favorite chapters of the New Testament, and the chapter which Pastor Bruce preached on in his video message last week.

Here's what we read toward the end of that chapter. 1st Corinthians 15:51-53 (NASB) – “Behold, I am telling you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed,<sup>52</sup> in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.<sup>53</sup> For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality.”

This occurs at the “last trumpet” ... at the end of time. And then the dead are raised with bodies that are different than the ones we have now. In the future, we will have bodies that are imperishable. But this is a topic for next week, when we discuss the resurrection of our human bodies. I'll be talking about that in more detail next week.

The topic before us today is the return of Christ. There are some important passages of Scripture which deal with this, some short and some long. Much of the book of Revelation deals with those end-time events, such as the return of Christ and His rule. Matthew chapter 24 is another important passage and I am going to focus on that chapter for the next few minutes. Matthew 24 describes the talk Jesus had with His disciples on the Mount of Olives outside the city of Jerusalem, a few days before His crucifixion. Because this talk occurs on the Mount of Olives, we call it the “Olivet Discourse.” He gives His disciples an overview of the types of things that they can expect to see from the current time up until the return of Christ. He mentions tribulations and wars and false prophets and other events that will occur before His return.

Over the years, different Bible commentators have approached Matthew 24 in different ways with differing viewpoints on the timeframe of the events and what the events described here might refer to as we see various things happening in the world around us. I won't be describing these differing viewpoints today. I would just like to highlight a few of the verses we see here and take away a few lessons we should learn for how we should be living while we await the return of Christ.

Matthew 24:1-2 (NASB) – “Jesus left the temple area and was going on His way when His disciples came up to point out the temple buildings to Him.<sup>2</sup> But He responded and said to them,

‘Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down’.”

The disciples are admiring the temple buildings, but Jesus responds by saying these buildings will all be completely torn down. His disciples then have a question for Him.

Matthew 24:3 (NASB) – “And as He [Jesus] was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, ‘Tell us, when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?’”

The disciples would like to know the time frame of events related to His return, so they ask Him what the sign will be of His return and the sign of the end of the age. Jesus answers with a mixture of images, but first with a word of caution.

Verses 4-5 – “And Jesus answered and said to them, ‘See to it that no one misleads you. <sup>5</sup> For many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and they will mislead many people.’...” The first thing Jesus does is to warn His followers about people making false claims. There were in the first and second centuries A.D. a number of people who made claims of messianic identity. Throughout church history, we have also seen various false teachers falsely claiming to speak for God. Jesus cautions His followers about such people.

Jesus continues His discourse. Matthew 24:6-7 (NASB) – “And you will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for those things must take place, but that is not yet the end. <sup>7</sup> For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places.”

Wars and rumors of wars ... famine and earthquakes – this is typical language that biblical prophets have used for describing the end of one age and the beginning of another. Such signs will precede the return of the Messiah.

Matthew 24:9 (NASB) – “... Then they will hand you over to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations because of My name.”

Tribulation – Jesus used this word a few times to indicate the opposition we will face when we spread the gospel. We bring the gospel to the nations, but in each place there will be people who oppose the message.

Matthew 24:14 (NASB) – “This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come.”

Jesus gave us the commission to make disciples of all nations and during these past 2,000 years we have seen the gospel message go out to many corners of the earth. Here is a sign that the end will come: when the gospel has been preached to all the nations. *When the gospel has been preached to all the nations.*

Verses 15 to 28 describe some more terrible events. I won't read this passage today. Verse 15 speaks of what is called the “abomination of desolation.” Many Bible commentators suggest that this could be a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by the Roman army in 70 A.D. I think that's a good suggestion.

[*Unspoken in the sermon:* Matthew 24:15 (NASB) – “Therefore when you see the ‘abomination of desolation’ which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place—let the reader understand—...”]

Next let's look at Matthew 24:29-31 (NASB) – “But immediately after the tribulation of those days THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED, AND THE MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS LIGHT, AND THE STARS WILL FALL from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.<sup>30</sup> And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the SON OF MAN COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF THE SKY with power and great glory.<sup>31</sup> And He will send forth His angels with A GREAT TRUMPET BLAST, and THEY WILL GATHER TOGETHER His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.”

Notice in verse 30 that “the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn.” The Son of Man is returning to earth ... and this statement that the tribes of earth will mourn probably means that all those persons who rejected the gospel message will mourn because they lost their chance at redemption – they will now be judged.

Verse 30 goes on to note that the Son of Man is coming on the clouds of heaven – that language comes from Daniel chapter 7 and I mentioned it to you earlier in today's sermon, since Jesus Christ referenced this phrase and applied it to Himself at His trial. Notice in verse 31 that there is a great trumpet blast, which is likely the same one in the 1st Corinthians 15 passage that I read a few minutes ago. Here, we read that the angels gather God's elect from the ends of the earth.

This harkens back to the first key verse referenced by Paragraph 7 of our Statement of Faith. John 14:2-3 (NASB) – “In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you.<sup>3</sup> And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.” This is the destiny of the elect ... this is the fulfillment of the promise Jesus made to His faithful followers.

Let's go back to the Olivet Discourse and see what Jesus says next. Matthew 24:32-33 (NASB) – “Now learn the parable from the fig tree: as soon as its branch has become tender and sprouts its leaves, you know that summer is near;<sup>33</sup> so you too, when you see all these things, recognize that He is near, right at the door.” And verse 42 – “Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming.”

Verse 33 – we must recognize that Christ is near, right at the door. He is almost here.

Verse 42 – we must be on the alert, because His return can be at any time.

After reading Matthew 24 many times and after observing church history and human history, it seems to me that we have seen all manner of wars and famines and disasters and pandemics. I have also noticed that nearly every generation of Christians have felt like the return of Christ was close to happening. Yes, indeed, it could happen at any time ... and we should live in anticipation that He could return at any moment.

Jesus concludes Matthew 24 with a little parable about being a faithful servant who is ready for the return of his master in contrast to a lazy servant who is not ready. Then in Matthew chapter 25, there are three more parables – all of them are about being ready for the Master to return, because if you are not ready, you may miss your chance to join Him when He returns.

Be ready. Be on the alert. Be faithful. Be Christian. Put your faith in Christ and have a right relationship with your Creator.

I would like to move on to another passage of Scripture that discusses the end of the age and the destruction of the old order.

2nd Peter 3:8-9 (NASB) – “But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. <sup>9</sup> The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not willing for any to perish, but for all to come to repentance.”

God’s time is not like our time. Do you think He is slow, 2000 years after Jesus commissioned His apostles to spread the gospel to all nations? He is not slow. He is patient. He wants everyone to come to repentance.

2nd Peter 3:10-13 (NASB) – “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. <sup>11</sup> Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, <sup>12</sup> looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! <sup>13</sup> But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells.”

Verse 13 – there is going to be a new heavens and new earth. Revelation 21-22 discusses this, and I will read about that next week.

Look at verse 11 again – “Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness.” Holy conduct and godliness.

And look at verse 12: “... looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God...” What does it mean to hasten the coming of the day of God? Maybe by living holy and God-honoring lives. Maybe by fulfilling the Great Commission and bringing more people into the Kingdom of God. It seems that, somehow, by doing what God wants us to do, we can hasten the return of Christ.

I am coming to the end of today’s message. I would like to highlight once more that question in 2nd Peter 3:11 – “Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness?”

What sort of people are we to be?

Remember that Paragraph 7 of our Statement of Faith states that our blessed hope of the return of Christ should influence our life and service. Given that we have been told what to expect in the future, how should we now live?

Live holy lives ... God-honoring lives.

Play your part in spreading the gospel – 1st Corinthians 12 says that each of us has been given a spiritual gift in order to help build up the church. Play your part in the discipleship-making task of the church.

Be alert. Be faithful. Be ready to meet the Lord when He returns.

I would like to close today's message with the words of the Apostle Paul to his faithful assistant Timothy which he wrote in his final letter. 2nd Timothy 4:7-8 (NASB) – “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; <sup>8</sup> in the future there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.”

There is a special reward that Paul expects to receive from the Lord. And he says that any one of us may also obtain it. It is a special award to every person “who has loved Christ's appearing.” Are you looking forward to the appearing of the Lord, to the return of the Lord? If so, there is a special reward for you. I pray that each of us will be looking forward to Christ's appearing, that each of us will be living godly lives of service, ready to meet our Lord.

God bless you all.