

Part V: Beyond the End

I Corinthians 13: 13

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

Chapter 23
 Wedding of the Lamb
 (Consummation of the ages)

Revelation 19: 6 – 9

6Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting:

"Hallelujah!

For our Lord God Almighty reigns.

7Let us rejoice and be glad
 and give him glory!

For the wedding of the Lamb has come,
 and his bride has made herself ready.

8Fine linen, bright and clean,
 was given her to wear." (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.)

9Then the angel said to me, "Write: 'Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!' " And he added, "These are the true words of God."

In the chapter of this book about Israel I wrote that the relationship between God and Israel is likened to the relationship between a husband and a wife. God has always been as a faithful husband to Israel, but Israel throughout most of its history (and down to the present, I am sad to say) has been as an unfaithful wife. Yet Bible prophecy assures us that, in the End Times, some Israelites will return to God, recognizing in Jesus Christ their Messiah. The nation will then enter the Millennial Kingdom of God with their particular and unique relationship with Him restored.

In the chapter of this book on the Church (defined as the fellowship of all true believers) I wrote that believers in Christ (Christians) also have a special relationship with God through His Son. This relationship between God (through Christ) and the Church is likened to the relationship between a bridegroom and his bride – a relationship that promises a consummation at the end of the age.

Revelation, Chapter 19, records John's vision of the end of the present age, when Christ shall return to the earth and put an end to the rebellion of mankind that culminates in the Great Tribulation. Verses 1 through 6 record how in heaven there will be rejoicing at the destruction of Mystery Babylon at the end of the Tribulation. As I wrote in the chapter of this book about her, I think this vile thing (Mystery Babylon) is in fact the last great whoredom of Israel. Others, of course, hold different interpretations regarding her identity, and they may be right. It is one of those things we will understand as we see it unfolding in (hopefully) the very near future. The important thing to note here is that Christ is coming, and He will come as a conquering king and

also as a bridegroom. This 'revelation' alone is enough to solicit rejoicing by all who anticipate with longing His great and blessed appearing.

Verses 7 through 9 describe the preparations of the Bride of Christ (that is, the Church) for the Wedding of the Lamb. She (that is, we who are His by faith) is given fine, bright, clean linen to wear. Verse 8 makes plain that this linen represents the acts of righteousness we have performed in life – that is, those things we did for the Glory of God, in obedience to His Commandments, and for the benefit of others.

Some Christians talk – or at least act – as if they will never have to face any kind of judgment, or give an accounting of their live to God. But this is not what the scriptures teach. While it is true that a Christian's eternal salvation is secured by their faith in the atoning work of Christ (John, Chapter 3, verse 16), scripture clearly tells us Christians will nevertheless be judged – we will be judged by how well we do the Will of God in our earthly lives, and we will be acknowledged and rewarded in heaven accordingly.

2 Corinthians 5: 9 – 10

So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

This idea of Christians being judged by how well we do the Will of God makes a lot of Christians uncomfortable. For some, it reminds them that, maybe, they are not living the life they know they should, nor serving God and keeping His commandments as well as they ought (if at all). They would rather not have to give an accounting for their Christian lives one day. For others, the idea of getting some kind of reward for obeying God runs counter to the idea that we ought to do what we do for love (for God and others) and not for eternal gain.

For those Christians who know they are not living as they should nor doing what they ought, I offer the following warning:

1 Corinthians 3: 10 – 15

By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.

I John 4: 16 – 19

And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

We love because he first loved us.

Revelation 19: 7 and 8

Let us rejoice and be glad

and give him glory!

For the wedding of the Lamb has come,

and his bride has made herself ready.

Fine linen, bright and clean,

was given her to wear." (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.)

The last three lines of scripture are particularly telling. What a shame it would be to show up at the Wedding of the Lamb singed and empty handed, with only the Grace of God to clothe one's nakedness for all eternity!

For those Christians troubled about proper motives for doing the Will of God, remember that our motivation should always be this: we do our very best to obey our Heavenly Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and serve others for their benefit and the Glory of God, building well on the firm foundation laid by Jesus Christ (there is no other but shifting sand). This should be enough to keep us humble, as we know we cannot build anything worthwhile, or do any truly good thing, without His help. And when we build for the Glory of God and the uplifting of others on the foundation already laid by Christ, the rewards actually take care of themselves.

Philippians 2: 2 – 13

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God,

did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing,

taking the very nature of a servant,

being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man,
 he humbled himself
 and became obedient to death—
 even death on a cross!
 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
 and gave him the name that is above every name,
 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
 in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
 to the glory of God the Father.
 Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only
 in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to
 work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who
 works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

That Christians are saved by grace, and not by works, is without question. This is the rock solid foundation of the Christian faith. Christ's sacrifice has covered the Christian's sins – those of commission as well as those of omission. Therefore, Christians do good works because they are saved, and not to be saved. And they realize they can never do enough, but with God's help they can and will do more.

As a Christian, I often wonder if I, throughout my life, will disappoint my Lord and Savior on that day when I stand before Him in judgment. So many opportunities lost. So many times when I did what I ought not and did not what I ought.

Thank God for His Mercy and Grace, without which I am the most miserable of men. All Praise and honor to Him, and Glory to God in the Highest. He is sufficient for me – He alone – and lo! I am made new! I will do more! And I will glory in God's Glory that what I do is never enough, and cannot be enough, yet it is more than I could ever have done, or will ever do, otherwise.

His Grace is sufficient for me, for His power is made perfect in my weakness. For when I am weak, then I am strong (II Corinthians, 12: 9 and 10).

In my absolute spiritual bankruptcy I find God's Grace – it cannot be found elsewhere. In God's Grace I find faith. Through faith, God works His Will in me. And the evidence of His Will at work in me is found in my works. In a very real sense, it is He Who is doing them, and not I. Give Him the Glory for them, for none of it is mine. Let Him do more through me, for I alone can do nothing.

See! Even my works (that is, those works I do through faith) are not of me, but of God. It is He who is working through me, and not myself working for

Him. And a very real joy I find in the works I do is the evidence that God has already accomplished His Grace in me.

Do not worry about works. Submit to God, and He will do all the work.

It all has to do with attitude. We best serve ourselves when we serve God and others. That is, the very acts of good we do (when motivated by unselfish love for God and others, and by obedience to His commandments) are, in and of themselves, blessings to us, both in this life and in the next. They are in fact their own reward. Indeed, in this matter we need not concern ourselves in the least, as it cannot help but take care of itself.

The Charm of the Redeemed is that they serve,
Not for the favor of men,
Nor for the favor of God,
But having the favor of God,
They serve.

And remember always, Christ Himself told us to do this:

Matthew 6: 19 – 21 (NIV)

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Still, it is probably best that we spend as little time as possible thinking about the whole issue of service and rewards. Except, of course, those of us who give little or no thought of service to God and others – these should think about it much. If we are already doing God's Will for the right reasons, He will lead us to greater service, remembering all we do for His Glory and the benefit of others. The less we think about this, the better – otherwise we may stumble into the temptation of counting up all the good we do and fall into the pit of pride.

During His earthly ministry, Jesus spoke many parables (stories) to illustrate the spiritual nature of our existence. One of His most disturbing stories is commonly called the Parable of the Talents:

Matthew 25: 14 – 23

"Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave five talents (a talent was worth more than a thousand dollars) of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each

according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. So also, the one with the two talents gained two more. But the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

"After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.'

"His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'

"The man with the two talents also came. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with two talents; see, I have gained two more.'

"His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'

"Then the man who had received the one talent came. 'Master,' he said, 'I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.'

"His master replied, 'You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest.'

" 'Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

A disturbing story indeed, and we wonder at the ultimate fate of the 'wicked, lazy servant'. Some have suggested that he was a servant in name only, and certainly by his actions we can conclude that in fact he did not serve the one he called his 'lord'. As I have noted elsewhere in this book, there are those who associate themselves with the Church in name only, thinking this alone will suffice to satisfy God (as opposed to receiving His Spirit and keeping His

Commandments). They call themselves Christians, but do not exhibit in their lives the teachings of Christ. Perhaps this servant is one such as these.

But more importantly for us, we need to take Christ's parable to heart. We need to examine our own lives against its message, and strive always to do His Will as He makes it known to us, trusting that, in all things, He is sufficient to our efforts and our needs.

Therefore let us always strive toward that day when we stand before Him and hear Him say those wonderful words: 'Well done, good and faithful servant!'

Chapter 24
The Millennial Kingdom
(The Kingdom Come Paradigm)

At the beginning of this book I said God has a Plan to re-conquer and recreate the earth. The Bible outlines this Plan, and how everyone who ever lived, or ever will live (including you and I) has a part in it. Indeed, the whole of Bible prophecy has, as its ultimate message and end, a declaration that God shall one day rule over the earth, and that all people (living and dead) shall recognize God in His Son, Jesus Christ, as the King of king and Lord of lords, before Whom every knee shall bow (Philippians, Chapter 2, verses 9 through 11).

Elsewhere in this book I wrote of paradigms, or models or explanations designed to describe how the world works. At the end of the chapter on America I wrote that, at the end of the age, the fates of nations will depend on their allegiance to, or their rebellion against, God's Plan. This will be the paradigm that best explains how the world will work in the near future – I call it, for want of a better term, the Kingdom Come Paradigm.

The term 'Millennial Kingdom' is not found in the Bible, but is sometimes used to describe a worldwide Kingdom of God, ruled by Jesus Christ and His followers, established at the end of the Seven Year Tribulation. The primary reference to this Kingdom is found in the Book of Revelation, Chapter 20. However, it is hinted at throughout the Bible in both the Old and New Testaments.

Revelation 20: 1 – 10

And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss 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. After that, he must be set free for a short time.

I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.

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 – Gog and Magog – to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore. They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

Here we see the fate of Satan, the chief of rebellious spirits, when Christ defeats the antichrist, the false prophet, and the armies of the world arrayed to oppose His Second Coming. Satan is bound for a thousand years, and during these thousand years the faithful followers of Christ rule the nations of the earth under His authority (thus the meaning of 'Millennial' – Latin for one thousand years – in the term: 'Millennial Kingdom').

In the Book of Genesis, Chapter 15, God promised Abraham that his descendants would one day have for an inheritance most of what is today the Middle East. Throughout the Old Testament are descriptions of this time, when Jerusalem is the capital not only of Israel but of the world, when the world worships God at the Temple in Jerusalem, and when all the nations surviving the Great Tribulation live at last in peace (Isaiah, Chapters 11, 30, 32 and 65; Ezekiel, Chapter 39, verses 22 through 29, and Chapters 40 through 48; Micah, Chapter 4).

Here I reference just a few of the prophecies affirming this time of restoration upon the earth, when justice reigns and nature is repaired and restored. The people of the earth who survive the Tribulation no longer make or even study war, but destroy their weapons and make tools instead, with which they build homes and productive lives. They settle down and raise families. Babies are born to them, and these grow up and live long and peaceful lives. Generation follows generation, repopulating the earth, knowing health and long life – anyone who dies before their 100th birthday is rare – and everyone enjoys the fruits of their labor without fear of someone taking it from them.

There are many, many more such passages. Yet it is at the end of the Bible, in Revelation, where we learn this glorious reign of peace will last a thousand years.

Some have suggested that such interpretation of scripture is erroneous. However, to support their positions, they must ignore parts of the Bible and allegorize other parts. As I have written elsewhere, such practices are themselves erroneous – and also dangerous. Those who want to believe that God will not deliver on His promises to Israel, to Jerusalem (the city that He loves), to His Holy Temple, and indeed His promises to all His faithful followers down through the ages, tread a twisted path that leads to confusion, doubt, and ultimately to a fiery end.

When this thousand years of peace are at an end, Satan will be once more released upon the earth and, incredibly, many will be swayed by his lies and join him in one last attempt to thwart God's Plan. We are not told why God allows Satan to be loosed once more upon the earth, or why people who have known a thousand years of God's Benevolent Reign can act so foolishly.

Yet throughout the Bible we are warned of the awful penchant for depravity to which humanity is susceptible – it is enough, here, to suggest, I think, that this last astounding rebellion is the final proof of that depravity.

And it is enough to say that all plans to 'make people better' – which do not involve their voluntary submission to the regeneration of their minds by the work of the indwelling Holy Spirit – are always doomed to failure. This is an indictment against all forms of social engineering, which over the last century has grown into a political science, and even into a kind of religion, to which many would-be reformers (including some Christians) subscribe. No plan to redeem humanity by 'other means' (that is, any means that does not involve God's Plan) will work. Good governance, freedom from want or fear or illness, fair play, universal peace and knowledge are worthy goals, and we should work to achieve them for all people everywhere. However, these are not a substitute for God's Plan. All this and more will be ours in the Millennial Kingdom, and still many will succumb to the temptation to go their own way rather than God's way. It is a warning that, as we near the end of the age, has more relevance to society than at any other time in history.

Revelation 22: 11

"Let him who does wrong continue to do wrong; let him who is vile continue to be vile; let him who does right continue to do right; and let him who is holy continue to be holy."

God will quickly suppress this ultimate rebellion. He will be done with second chances. His Divine Patience will at last be at an end. He will destroy these rebels and confine Satan to the ultimate depository for all rebels – the lake of fire – where all rebels are consumed by their rebellious rage forever.

The last verses of Revelation, Chapter 20, describe the final Judgment of God. These verses speak for themselves. Nothing can be simpler than this: that those who have not surrendered their lives to the regenerative work of God's Plan for the redemption of humanity will be excluded from His presence forever. This includes exclusion from His recreated earth for, at the end of all things, it is part of His Plan that both earth and heaven shall be joined and that He shall dwell among His people forever.

Chapter 25
White Throne of Judgment
(The good and the bad)

Revelation 20: 11 – 15

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Many would like to ignore, or even deny, that there will come a Judgment Day. Yet the Bible is filled with warnings of a great and awful day of judgment, when the fates of billions are determined for eternity by the choices they made in life. We ignore or deny it to our peril.

In Revelation, Chapter 20, verses 11 through 15, we see the Day of God's Judgment prophesied in no uncertain terms. In verse 11 the Great White Throne of Judgment appears at the end of the Millennial Kingdom. It appears at the end of time, after Christ destroys the last of earthly rebels and throws Satan into the lake of burning sulphur. The reference to the earth and sky fleeing from God's presence may suggest that the old heaven and the old earth has passed away (consumed by fire) to make way for the new heaven and the new earth, which appear after God finishes judging mankind.

The question is asked: Who, exactly, are judged?

The answer is: A matter of some debate among Christians.

Some Christians think Revelation, Chapter 20, verses 11 through 15 refer to a general judgment, at the end of the age, of all people who have ever lived. At that time, according to this position, those who accepted Christ as their savior ascend to heaven, and there live with God for eternity. Some believe that God, in His Mercy and Justice, also provides for the salvation of godly people who lived prior to Christ completing His atoning work, for infants and children, and for those who never had an opportunity to learn about God's Plan for Salvation by Grace through Christ. The rest of humanity – those who rejected God's provision for their redemption – will be judged lost in their sins and cast into the lake of fire.

Many Christians who hold some or all of these beliefs do not subscribe to a literal interpretation of Bible prophecy regarding the end of the age, the Tribulation and the Millennial Kingdom. Others, sadly, are merely ignorant of the prophecies, having never taken the time nor made the effort to study them.

Among those Christians who do subscribe to a literal interpretation of Bible prophecy, many believe that Christians will be spared this final judgment, having already ascended to God at the rapture/resurrection of the Church, and having already returned to earth as Christ's purified Bride to rule in the Millennial Kingdom (Revelation, Chapter 20, verses 4 through 6; also Revelation, Chapter 2, verse 88 and Chapter 3, verse 21). This is not to suggest Christians are not judged. As noted in the chapter of this book about the Wedding of the Lamb, Christians will face another kind of judgment – they will be judged by how well they did the Will of God in their earthly lives, but will be spared this final judgment at the end of the age.

So, if Christians are not judged before the Great White Throne at the end of the age, who then are judged?

Some suggest that only lost sinners are judged. The church is raptured/resurrected and judged at the end of the Tribulation, over a thousand years prior to the appearing of the Great White Throne. And in Revelation, Chapter 20, verses 4 through 6, we read that, at the end of the Tribulation, the Tribulation Saints or Martyrs (that is, those who are killed proclaiming Christ during the reign of the antichrist) are also resurrected, and these rule with and Christ and His Bride over the Millennial Kingdom. Perhaps we can assume that any Tribulation Saints surviving the Tribulation without suffering martyrdom are similarly rewarded and blessed. The scriptures are curiously silent on this point – there are to my knowledge no scriptures suggesting that any of the Tribulation Saints escape martyrdom. However, the scriptures do make plain that any who are Christ's at His Second Coming, wherever they are, will be counted among the redeemed, and will be among the multitude deemed worthy to don the clean bright linen of the Bride (Revelation, Chapter 6, verses 9 through 11).

So, who does that leave besides the lost? What about the Old Testament Saints – Abraham, David, Daniel and many others – who did not know about Jesus Christ and His redemptive work but whose faith in, and obedience to, God was counted unto them for righteousness? These are not of the Church (the Bride of Christ). However, they are counted among God's redeemed, as God Himself has testified.

Genesis 15: 4 – 6

Then the word of the LORD came to him (Abram, whom God would rename Abraham): "This man (Abram's servant) will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir." He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars – if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."

Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness. (Text in parenthesis added)

The Apostle Paul confirmed that God justified Abraham because of his faith.

Romans 4: 1 – 3

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about – but not before God. What does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."

In the same way, David was assured of his redemption – by his faith in, and obedience to, God.

Psalm 17: 15

And I—in righteousness I will see your face;
when I awake, I will be satisfied with seeing your likeness.

Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever. (King James Version)

Psalm 32: 1 and 2

Blessed is he
whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.
Blessed is the man
whose sin the LORD does not count against him
and in whose spirit is no deceit.

As with Abraham, the Apostle Paul confirmed that David's faith was counted unto him also as righteousness.

Romans 4: 6 – 8

David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works:

"Blessed are they

whose transgressions are forgiven,

whose sins are covered.

Blessed is the man

whose sin the Lord will never count against him."

As the Old Testament Saints are not among those who are called the Bride of Christ, perhaps they rest throughout the trials of the Church Age, the Tribulation, and the Millennial Kingdom, to be raised and judged at the end of time, before the Great White Throne.

Daniel 12: 13

"As for you (Daniel), go your way till the end. You will rest, and then at the end of the days you will rise to receive your allotted inheritance." (Text in parenthesis added)

In this verse the Prophet Daniel is assured that, at the end of his life on earth, he will rest, and then 'at the end of the days' he will rise to receive his inheritance (reward and recognition). The phrase 'end of the days' is a good description of the end of the old heaven and earth in time, and the beginning of the new heaven and the new earth in eternity, where there is neither day nor night.

Those standing before the White Throne may also include the faithful of the earth who die during the Millennial Kingdom, and also the faithful born during the Millennial Kingdom who are still alive on the earth at the end of the thousand years. Again, scripture is silent on these matters. However, as noted in the chapter of this book on the Millennial Kingdom, scriptures do suggest that people other than the Church/Bride will live on the earth during the Millennial Kingdom. There will be the people who survive the Great Tribulation, including many godly Jews but also many of the Gentile nations. These people will rebuild, marry, give birth to children, raise families, and some of them will die during the Millennial Kingdom, and others will live until the end of the thousand years.

So perhaps, in addition to the lost who have died in sin throughout the ages, we may see the Old Testament Saints, as well as believers from the Millennial Kingdom, standing before the Great White Throne of Judgment. Whoever stands there, we read in Revelation, Chapter 20, verses 12 through 15, their fate – they are judged according to their works, and by whether their names are written in the Book of Life (that is, whether they were, in life, among the righteous, as evidenced by their faith in, and obedience to, God). If only the unredeemed are judged, why

bother to open the Book of Life at all? Verse 15 states that 'if' their names are not found in this book they are thrown into the lake of fire. This suggests to me that, among those judged, are those who do in fact have their names written in the Book of Life.

And what about those who have never had a chance to learn about the One True God, or of His Plan for the redemption of mankind through His Son, Jesus Christ? Ideally the Church, in fulfilling its mission of evangelism, reaches out to the whole world with the message of God's Grace. But we can be certain that, down through the ages, many have lived out their lives and died without ever having an opportunity to hear about, and respond to, this message. And we also wonder about infants and children who tragically die before reaching an age whereby they can understand this message and chose what they will believe and what they will do.

This much we do know – we are all born with a sin-nature; we are also born with an innate sense of the Divine. We know the difference between good and evil.

Exodus 20: 12 – 17

"Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.

"You shall not murder.

"You shall not commit adultery.

"You shall not steal.

"You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

"You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."

Most societies and cultures (even those indifferent or even hostile toward Christianity) endorse these commandments, or at least some variant of them. People know it is good to honor parents and bad to commit murder, sleep with another's spouse, steal, lie, or want belongs to another. That people do not honor parents and do commit murder and adultery, steal, lie and desire another person's property or spouse is an indictment against their selfishness. When they excuse what they have done it is an indictment against their self-righteousness. That they sometimes regret what they have done (as opposed to regretting only that they got caught) and seek forgiveness, making restitution when possible, it is evidence that they are capable of something more than selfishness and self-righteousness.

All who have ever lived and ever shall live will be judged according to their knowledge of, and their response to, the good and the evil in their lives:

Romans 1: 18 – 20

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of

the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

Romans 2: 12 – 16

All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.) This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.

God, in His Justice, will always judge justly. In His Mercy, He will be merciful. The Old Testament Saints did not know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour, yet they believed God and did what He told them to do, and this was credited to them as righteousness. To whom much is given, much will be expected, and to whom little is given, little will be expected (Luke, Chapter 12, verses 47 and 48).

As I have said throughout this book, some things are hidden from us for now. And I hope here I have not come across as dogmatic. For those of my Christian brothers and sister who incline to dogmatism (of any kind), I humbly suggest that, for us to debate these things, before they are revealed, is a waste of our time. Our time is better spent going about our Father's Business, as He has revealed this to us, including His Great Commission; that is, spreading the good news of His Grace through Christ to all the world (Matthew, Chapter 28, verses 18 through 20).

It is natural and good to be interested in, and curious about, our future with God. But for much we shall just have to wait and see. Until then, let us busy ourselves in God's revealed work in the sure knowledge that, in the end of all days, we and all others stand with God or against Him, and nowhere else.

The question is asked: Will the spirits of unredeemed humanity be tormented in the lake of fire forever?

The answer is: Unfortunately, yes. When we reject the good, all that is left is the bad.

Perhaps no Christian doctrine is so hard as that of eternal damnation – of everlasting punishment for those who have no faith in God and do not keep His commandments. Eternity is

an awful long time, and none of us likes to think of loved ones or – when we are charitable – of anyone spending eternity in a place of torment. If God is Good (and He is supremely), why then would He allow such a thing? Why would a loving God Who, not wishing any to perish, allow any of His creatures suffer torment forever? Why would He allow such a place as a lake of burning sulphur to exist at all?

Hard questions. But matters of faith, of obedience, and of our accountability for and the consequences of the choices we make in life are, in all things scriptural, where the theological rubber hits the road. And the road to eternity is both hard and unyielding.

"There is but one good; that is God. Everything else is good when it looks to Him and bad when it turns from Him." Thus C. S. Lewis quoted, in his little book "The Great Divorce", the Scottish Christian writer, George MacDonald, who summed the whole of all things, both good and bad, in two simple sentences.

All good things come from God and in the end return to Him. In truth the ultimate good is God (God is Good). Everything God gives us is good for us. Everything God denies us, if we take it, is bad for us. Everything God tells us to do, if we do it, is good for us. Everything God tells us not to do, if we do it, is bad for us. God is the very substance and embodiment of all things good. There is nothing good that is not from God and, at the end of time, heaven (the abode and kingdom of God) will be the final depository of all that is good.

In the scriptures we learn that the way to God and heaven is straight and narrow. But in life we come continually to the fork in the road. There we choose to look to God, or we choose to turn from Him. We choose to follow God's way, or we choose to follow another way. We choose to place our faith in God, or we place our faith in ourselves, or in someone or something else. We love God above all else, or we love something else. We keep His commandments, or we do not.

Those who seek the Goodness of God, having never seen God, nevertheless by faith choose to love God, and do so by keeping His commandments. What is faith? According to the Book of Hebrews, Chapter 11, verse 1: "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see". What is love for God? According to the Book of I John, Chapter 5, verse 3: "This is love for God: to obey his commands". It is by this faith, by this love, and by obedience to these commandments, that those who seek God are awakened to a desire for all that is Good (that is, they look to God) and begin to lose all desire for all that is bad (that is, they turn not away from Him).

It is by this faith, love and obedience that those who seek God begin a life-journey that will bring them to, and make them fit for, heaven. And their joy in heaven will be at last the gain of all that is Good. Indeed, they aspire to heaven because they, in the end, will have desired nothing else.

Conversely, those who do not seek God, but instead seek something (anything) else in place of God, have no faith in God. They have no love for God. They do not keep His commandments. In other words, they have chosen not to look to God. They have turned from God. Therefore, they do not – by their choice they cannot – desire heaven, which is filled with the Presence and the Goodness of God.

John Milton, in his epic poem "Paradise Lost", suggested that Satan prefers to rule in hell than serve in heaven. That might be what Satan prefers. But there will be no pitchforks in hell, nor will Satan rule. Demons, including Satan, will share the torments of hell with all likeminded creatures – that is, all who do not seek the Goodness of God, but seek instead something else.

The day is coming when those who seek other than God must lose all they desired, enjoyed, cherished, or clutched at in life – the good returned to God, the bad consigned to damnation. Nothing will be exempt – the affections, attention, fame, money, power, privilege, possessions, passions and pleasures they sought, bought and demanded of others; their ability to affect, influence, and control their lives and the lives of others (for good or bad); and even (for humans) physical life itself and, with the loss of physical (earthly) life, the loss of their bodies. The torments of hell may be nothing more, and nothing less, than this loss of life and all else those who seek other than God (human and demon alike) desired, pursued, and possessed while free of hell's confinement – that is, while they moved upon, or above, the face of the earth, in rebellious rejection of God's Goodness.

What do you love most in this life? What must you have? What comes between you and God? What do you substitute for a faith in God? What will you not give up that keeps you from keeping His commandments? Whatever it is, can you take it with you when you leave this life behind you? Imagine the smoldering rage of Satan's pride eternally impotent and frustrated, the burning agonies of carnal passions forever denied. Desires that cannot be satisfied. Hungers that cannot be filled. Thirsts that cannot be quenched. Imagine a place devoid of all that is good, the depository of all that is bad. All publicly flaunted and privately hidden prides, prejudices, lusts, greeds, cruelties, vanities, intolerances, hates, and rebelliousness – the horrifically great or the pathetically small – confined in one place undiluted, unyielding, and unsatisfied, folded inward and without release, entwined forever with the spirits of those who, in life, despised, ignored or merely paid lip service to their opposites (humility, tolerance, purity, generosity, kindness, helpfulness, forbearance, love and obedience). These are hell's torments. And such torments the damned choose and make for themselves, while they yet live.

But could those who reject the Goodness of God – indeed, would those who throughout their lives have sought other than God – wishing to escape the self-inflicted torments of hell, choose then by faith to keep God's commandments? Where could they go to exercise this faith? Where could they go to keep these commandments? In other words, where could they go to be made fit for heaven? It is not enough to wish escape from hell – to where would they escape?

Earth? Earth is where the seekers of God learn by faith to love Him by keeping His commandments. There they are refined and made fit for heaven. But earthly life will have ended, and scripture makes plain that the earth will not always be what it is today – that God will one day remake the earth and therein dwell among men. In other words, heaven and earth will one day be one.

Heaven? But those who have rejected God have not desired heaven (which is filled with the Presence and the Goodness of God) and besides, heaven is beyond both faith and commandments. There is no faith, where the faithful shall live at last in the Presence of the

Object of their faith. There are no commandments where those who keep God's commandments shall forever desire the Good and nothing else.

Imagine a day when we have no longer the capacity to indulge our prides and passions, but only the memory of them. To some this would be hell indeed – but to others this would be heaven.

Matthew 6: 33

But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

When this life is ended and this earth is gone, all that is good will reside in heaven, and all that is left will be hell. All who desire heaven shall gain it, and with it all things Good. The rest are damned because they want something else.

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Chapter 26
New Heavens and New Earth
(All things new)

Revelation 21: 1 – 4

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

There are not words adequate to describe the Glory of God's fulfillment of His Plan to redeem humanity and renew the earth. When we read Chapters 21 and 22 of the Book of Revelation we are left wanting more, for we know what is written there is but a fraction of the whole.

In Revelation, Chapter 21, we see a new heaven and a new earth. The first heaven and the first earth (the only ones we have ever known) have passed away.

The heaven that passes away may be the sky above the earth – certainly God's Heavenly Kingdom is unchanging from eternity to eternity. Sometimes in scripture the word 'heaven' means the atmosphere of the earth, with its wind and rain and clouds, and that may be the meaning here.

The new earth will replace the old as the abode of the redeemed. The reference to the sea being no more is a mystery – why would God not recreate the oceans in the new earth? Perhaps this is a reference to the restless 'sea of humanity', which in scripture means the turmoil of the nations. Such turmoil will certainly be no more. In the middle of Chapter 20 of Revelation (verses 7 through 9), we read of the final rebellion of humanity at the end of the Millennial Kingdom, when unrepentant humanity makes one last attempt to overthrow God and His redeemed. God's reaction is quick – He destroys these rebels with fire from the sky.

As noted in earlier chapters of this book an asteroid strike could explain some of the plagues visited upon the earth during the Tribulation period. Then, about a third of the earth's surface is burned with fire from the sky. But at the end of the Millennial Kingdom all of rebellious humanity will be destroyed by fire from the sky – might this fire also destroy all of the earth?

In the Book of Second Peter, Chapter 3, verses 7 through 13, we learn that one day the earth will indeed be destroyed by fire. Today the earth is in fact a ball of molten matter, covered by a thin crust of rock and soil that holds in its red-hot interior. This rocky crust is like a cracked

egg shell, and the pieces of this shell – the continents and tectonic plates – literally float on a bed of molten rock, bumping and grinding into each other and causing earthquakes and tsunamis. When the molten interior of the earth bursts through the thin veneer of rock, volcanic eruptions spew rivers of lava across the landscape and choking clouds of sulphurous, acid-laden ash and vapor into the atmosphere.

What if a larger asteroid were to strike the earth's fragile crust at the end of the Millennial Kingdom – an asteroid large enough to shatter and melt its crust and spew its molten interior into space? By some estimates, the asteroid scientists theorize ended the age of the dinosaurs was a mere five or six miles across, and gouged out a crater in the earth's surface over a hundred miles wide. There are asteroids whizzing around the sun that are 500 to 600 miles across. An impact from such a monster rock or bigger would melt the earth's surface, vaporize its atmosphere and oceans, destroy all life, and eliminate every physical trace of humanity's existence. But depending on the size of this impacting asteroid, the earth's matter would not be splattered across the cosmos. Its gravity would pull it back together, and once again the earth would coalesce into its former shape, and thereby be made anew.

We may wonder why God would go to such an extreme to wipe away all evidence of humanity's past sinfulness. Why destroy the whole of the earth? What have all the plants and animals that live on its surface done to deserve such a fate?

We know that man and nature are intimately joined, and what mankind does – for good or evil – has consequences reaching far beyond humanity.

Romans 8: 19 – 21

The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

We know that the innocent suffer consequences from the sins of others. Society today struggles with broken families, abandoned and abused children, and infants from the womb addicted to and damaged by drug abuse, to mention only a few examples of the 'collateral damage' of sinfulness. The first man was made from the dust of the earth, and his food was in the seeds and the fruit of the earth. He was given dominion over the earth and charged with its care. In ways we can barely imagine or understand, the fate of the whole planet hinges on humanity's spiritual condition, and scripture makes it abundantly clear that human wickedness will continue to plague the earth and do it damage until God ends all wickedness, wiping it from the face of the earth forever.

By whatever the mechanism and for whatever reasons, Revelation, Chapter 21, begins with a declaration that in eternity there will be a new heaven and a new earth, the old heaven and the old earth having passed away.

In verses 2 and 3 we see the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. This is both a literal city, and also a people – the Bride of Christ, the resurrected and transformed multitude of believers from every race and nation and age who will now, and forevermore, dwell in the Presence of God, Who was the Object of their faith, love, obedience and longing throughout their former, temporal lives.

Verse 4 assures us that God will wipe away every tear from the eyes of His redeemed – but what tears? Tears of joy for having gained at long last their hearts' desire? Tears of reunion with loved ones who preceded them in death? Tears of grief for lost loved ones – indeed, for all of lost humanity – who rejected God's love and condemned themselves to the lake of fire?

Some suggest that this verse refers to God erasing the memory of lost loved ones, arguing that none of the redeemed can enjoy the bliss of heaven while knowing the unredeemed remain in torment forever. But this is mere conjecture – perhaps wishful thinking – as there are to my knowledge no other scripture supporting such interpretation. Where in scripture do we find any examples of God erasing memories?

Scripture declares that God will forget the sins of Israel when He establishes His new covenant with the Jewish people (Jeremiah, Chapter 31, verses 31 through 34; Hebrews, Chapter 8, verses 7 through 12). Yet God is omniscient, or all knowing (1 John, Chapter 3, verse 20). How can he forget anything if He knows everything?

Forgetfulness in scripture is sometimes misunderstood. The Book of Jeremiah is filled with condemnations for the Israelites for having forgotten God in their idolatry. Yet the prophet's purpose was to remind them of the seriousness of their sin – if they had truly forgotten all about the covenant relationship with God that they had inherited from their ancestors through Abraham, how could anything the prophet say make any sense to them? What they had done was treat their covenant with God as if it were of no account or of any future consequence, or not worth honoring or remembering. They had forgotten it in the sense that it was no longer important in their lives.

In the Book of Genesis we have the example of Joseph, a descendant of Abraham, who named his first son Manasseh, which sounds like the Hebrew word for 'forget', saying: 'It is because God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household' (Genesis, Chapter 41, verse 51). In his youth, Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery and he was carried off in bondage to Egypt. But Joseph remained faithful to God despite his misfortunes, and with God's help he eventually triumphed over his troubles and rose to a position of power in Pharaoh's court. Joseph did not literally forget his past – he instead let it go and made it of no consequence to the joys of his good fortune. He decided to not dwell on past misfortunes and wrongs done him, but to let bygones be bygones. And we know that he in fact did not forget his brothers when he eventually had them in his power to take revenge, but instead forgave them their sins against him. He forgot his brothers' misdeeds in that he considered them of no consequence to his future relationship to them.

In scripture we have the good news that if, by faith, we confess our sins and repent, God will forgive us.

Isaiah 1: 18 (NIV)

"Come now, let us reason together,"
says the LORD.

"Though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red as crimson,
they shall be like wool.

Psalms 103: 8 – 12 (NIV)

The LORD is compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, abounding in love.

He will not always accuse,
nor will he harbor his anger forever;

he does not treat us as our sins deserve
or repay us according to our iniquities.

For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his love for those who fear him;

as far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

'Forgive and forget' is not a phrase found in the Bible. Nowhere in scripture is there anything that suggests we, or God, ever forget our past sinfulness. It is abundantly clear, however, that because of the atoning work of Christ, when we repent of our sins, confessing them and asking forgiveness, God forgives us our sins and considers us not guilty. He treats us as if we had never sinned – as if He had forgotten that we have sinned.

1 Peter 3: 18 (NIV)

For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit,

Ephesians 1: 7 (NIV)

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace

1 John 1: 9 (NIV)

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Yet if the redeemed are not purged of memories of lost loved ones, how then can the redeemed in heaven not mourn for the eternally lost? In life we lose loved ones to death, some

we know having rejected God's provision for their redemption. We mourn their passing and their fate, but then life goes on. Do we forego the pleasures of life in consequence to their rebelliousness? Perhaps some do, and eventually we sense that something is wrong with them – that the living who grieve continually have thus enslaved themselves to the folly and error of the dead. Shall we deny ourselves the Good because others have denied the Good themselves? Taken to its logical conclusion, that would give sin the victory over obedience, and death the victory over life. To suggest that the joy of heaven must be delayed or held hostage to the intransigence of the unrepentant rebel would give Satan a victory over God.

Verse 4 assures us that there will be no more mourning or crying or pain. The old order of things (sin, death, suffering, grief) has passed away. But nowhere in scripture do we find that heaven will be a place of blissful forgetfulness. We get the impression instead that part of its joy will be the memory of God's victory over sin and death, and how by His Grace and Mercy we are able there to build a new existence, one based in part on what we once were and experienced – and what we remember – from our previous, earthly life. Nirvana is the stuff of other religions, not of Christianity. Past, however, will be past, and in eternity we move on. Verse 5 assures us that a sad and tragic chapter in human existence is now closed forever, and that all things are made new. And all who want to participate in this new order may do so – verse 6 invites all who wish it to partake in eternal life – none are denied this if they want it, but neither are any compelled. The choice is ours. Verses 7 and 8 make this abundantly plain – those who seek first the Kingdom of God shall have it, with all things good (Matthew, Chapter 6, verse 33). But those seeking anything else by their own choice consign themselves to the lake of burning sulphur.

Verses 9 through 21 describe the New Jerusalem. It is definitely a place – a city – as well as a people. We cannot imagine such a place. At least, we cannot imagine it in this life, or upon this earth. I certainly cannot add to what John the Revelator recorded of that place. And while many have tried to interpret the elements he describes, all such efforts leave me with a distinct feeling that they fall far short of the reality, which to my mind must remain a profound mystery until we see and experience that place for ourselves. This said, I do think the references to the Twelve Tribes of Israel and the Twelve Apostles are an indication of the inclusiveness of both Jew and Gentile among the city's inhabitants.

The dimensions of the city are fantastic – but then, everything about the city is fantastic. Perhaps the dimensions of the city are an indication that that this city will fill the whole earth. The significance of the measurements of the city's length, width and height may lie in the number of units recorded, rather than the actual dimensions – 1,200 units on a side: 12 x 10 x 10, perhaps indicating the all-inclusiveness of the nature of the city, rather than a mere literal dimension that some have worked out to be around 1,500 miles on a side.

The shape of the city is represented as a cube – the shape of the Most Holy Place, or the Holy of Holies in the earthly temples of earthly Jerusalem. This was the one place where God was supposed to dwell upon the earth among men in Old Testament times. In the New Jerusalem, He will dwell throughout the city – the whole city will be His Dwelling.

As I have said, the description defies the imagination. We will just have to wait and see, when we get there.

Verses 22 through 26 reinforce the Presence of God throughout the city. The city has no temple – God is done with temples, and with Holy of Holies, and dwells among His people everywhere. The indwelling Holy Spirit is, in this life, a foretaste of this Omni-Presence of God in the life of every believer, and we are told that our bodies are in fact His temple (1 Corinthians, Chapter 6, verse 19). What is now true for the believer will be true for the whole of the New Jerusalem.

Verse 27 assures us that nothing corrupted by sinfulness will ever enter the Holy City. Only those who are done with sin forever can enter its gates.

Chapter 22, verses 1 through 9, give a few more details of this city. Both the river and the tree of life are there. Denied our first ancestors when they rebelled against God, now eternal life and healing, health and fullness are available once more to all who have the name of their God on their foreheads – that is, those who want the Good (of God) and nothing else.

There will be work for us to do in heaven. The redeemed will serve God in eternity. There will be rest and peace, but there will be work also.

Our first ancestors, before they sinned, were given dominion over the earth and charged with caring for it and all the animals and plants. We, in life, earn our daily bread by our labor. We work to spread the Gospel of Salvation throughout the world. We strive to relieve the suffering and pain and want of others whenever and however we can. What our work will be in heaven we are not told, but obviously God will have much He will want us to do.

Verses 10 and 11 are a warning. Our choices in life have consequences, and we are responsible for the consequences of the choices we make. The farther we go down our chosen path, the closer we get to our final destination. And at the end of all time there are only two possible endings to life's journey – the Holy City of God or a lake of burning sulphur.

Chapter 22 is the last chapter in the Bible, and it ends with an invitation, a warning, and a blessing. All are invited to join the redeemed on the pathway to the New Jerusalem – none are excluded, if they only will come. All are warned not to add to, or take away from, what God has revealed regarding His Plan for the re-conquest and recreation of the earth, and for the redemption of mankind through His Sacrifice and his Indwelling Holy Spirit for the renewal of our minds. He is coming. His Will shall be done. What He has revealed to us will happen. What He has hidden from us will remain hidden. We tamper with any of it to our peril.

A word of warning may be appropriate at this point. Our curiosity and questions about the hereafter are natural, and it is good for us to think about our future home in Paradise. However, some things are not told us, and we are not to make up answers to questions that God, for His Own good reasons, has hidden. Some misguided or self-deluded 'prophets' and 'teachers' have gone so far as to create new religions based upon their speculations, and such efforts are both dangerous and wrong – dead wrong. Such have grievously erred, to their own detriment and to the harm of others.

Still, we are invited to participate in Christ's Glorious Coming. May God bless us in our pilgrimage to the New Jerusalem. May He bring us safely to our Heavenly Home.

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Chapter 27
Maranatha!
(Christ is coming)

Matthew 25: 31 - 44

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'

"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

"They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

"He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

"Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

It is not pleasant to think of Jesus Christ – the Lamb of God and the Suffering Servant – condemning anyone to eternal punishment, and especially those who thought they were, or at least claimed to be, His servants. But there it is, one of the most sobering passages in the Bible.

The question is asked: If those who call Christ 'Lord' cannot be certain of escaping hell, who can?

The answer is: Those who obey Him. That is what calling Him 'Lord' means.

When Americans talk of lords and kings, these are usually characters in fairy tales or history. No American has ever been ruled by a lord or a king; we became Americans exactly at the point in our history when we stopped doing that. We are accustomed to government 'of the people, for the people and by the people'. We elect our leaders. They are accountable to us, the electorate, except when we become lazy and do not bother to hold them accountable. Our leaders have no legal authority over us that we have not granted them by law. Indeed, as a nation and a people we have bound ourselves to the rule of law, not of kings and lords.

Our relationship with God is different. We are His creatures. He is our Creator. And in the Person of Jesus Christ, He is our Lord. We obey Him, or we are rebels. It is either/or, and not in between. We do not have the luxury of voting God out of office. We cannot legislate limits on His Power and Authority. It is either His way or no way. There is, when all is said and done, no other way, but the way of sin and damnation.

In the Book of Matthew, Chapters 5 through 7, we read what is commonly called the Sermon on the Mount, or the first recorded sermon or teaching of Jesus Christ. If you are not familiar with these chapters of the Bible, you should stop reading this right now and pull out your Bible and read them. In these chapters Jesus Christ, the Savior and Lord of the Word, lays out quite plainly what He expects of those who would call Him Savior and Lord.

There is nothing mysterious about what He says in these chapters. None of it is allegory, though many might wish it so. The metaphors (salt, light, etc.) are easily understood. And everything recorded in these chapters is as relevant today as it was when He said it almost two thousand years ago.

Many people are at least somewhat familiar with the first part of Chapter 5, or what we call the Beatitudes. These are the blessings Jesus pronounces upon those who are poor in spirit, who mourn, who are meek, who hunger and thirst for righteousness, who are merciful, who are pure in heart and who are peace makers – but what exactly is He saying? Do these blessings apply to anyone who happens to exhibit any these characteristics at any time for any reason? That would certainly be something useful to have around. It would be like having a bottle of magic blessing pills in the medicine cabinet. Just pop the pill you think will comfort you in your current situation.

Most people, when they quote from the Beatitudes, quote from the first seven. It might be revealing to know why most people prefer to ignore the eighth blessing – the special blessing for those who are persecuted for their faith in, and obedience to, Him.

Perhaps Jesus is talking about something more than most people are willing to read into His Words. Perhaps He is talking here about a process; a process whereby we come to a saving knowledge of – and develop a proper relationship with – God, by recognizing our spiritual poverty, mourn for our lost condition and submit (with meekness) to the Will of God so that we may thereby begin to want His righteousness more than anything else in the world and, as a consequence of our submission (and with the help of His indwelling Holy Spirit) begin to exhibit such qualities as mercy, purity of heart, and peace with God and our fellow human beings. Perhaps He wants us to exhibit all of these qualities all of the time, so that we might receive all of His blessings (that is, the blessings that come with a right relationship with God thorough faith and regeneration) always.

Is that what you read into His words? More? If you are like most casual readers of God's Word (that is, like most people) you read less – much less – into them than you ought. These are not simple platitudes, nor are they soft sayings to comfort the unrepentant or the rebel. His Words are a challenge that Jesus Christ threw down to the crowds at the beginning of His three-year ministry; a challenge to " - - - Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." (Matthew, Chapter 3, verse 2). It is a challenge that rings as true today, at the end of the present age, as it did at the beginning.

And what about the rest of the Sermon on the Mount? Most people probably recognize bits and pieces of it. At the same time most seem to ignore most if not all of it, as if what Jesus had to say about hatred, lust, violation of marriage vows, honesty, integrity, forgiveness, loving our enemies, giving to the needy, motivations for what we do, setting priorities, trusting God, judging others, and assessing the trustworthiness of religious teachers were not important enough for us to give a lot of time and attention. Yet He plainly states at the end of His Sermon that everyone who hears (or reads) His Words – and puts them into practice – is wise. Everyone who does not is foolish.

Matthew 7: 21

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."

Many people are also familiar with that part of Christ's Sermon where He taught how we ought to pray – what we call the 'Lord's Prayer'. People like those described in the passage above probably mouth the words to the Lord's Prayer throughout their lives at church services and funerals without ever giving a serious thought to what they are saying. Nevertheless they will one day give an accounting for every idle word (or prayer) they utter (Matthew, Chapter 12, verses 36 and 37).

For this is how Jesus has taught us to pray (Matthew, Chapter 6, verses 9 through 13:

- - - Our Father which art in heaven,

Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil:
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever.
Amen. (King James Version)

Do we acknowledge God's authority in our lives?

Psalm 24: 1
The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all
who live in it;

Do we acknowledge Who (and What) He really is?

Revelation 4: 8
Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered
with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they
never stop saying: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty,
who was, and is, and is to come."

Do we really want the coming of His Kingdom on earth?

Revelation 19: 11 – 12
I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse,
whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and
makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many
crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he
himself.

Do we want His Will, and not our will, guiding and controlling our lives? Really?

Revelation 19: 15 – 16
Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down
the nations. "He will rule them with an iron scepter." He treads the
winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe
and on his thigh he has this name written:
KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.

Do we acknowledge that all good things are from God? Do we trust Him to deliver?
What about a right relationship with Him, founded on faith and obedience?

Matthew 7: 7 – 8

"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened."

Do we acknowledge that all our sins are against Him, and that He can (and will) forgive our sins?

Isaiah 53: 6

We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him (Jesus Christ) the iniquity of us all. (Text in parentheses added)

But are we first willing to forgive?

Matthew 6: 14 – 15

"For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."

How about: lead us away from temptation? Are we really willing to follow the Leader?

James 4: 7 – 10

Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

The evil one – Satan – is he really our foe? Or is he our friend?

I Peter 5: 8 – 11

Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.

And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.

Are we citizens of His Kingdom, or do we give ourselves to an earthly kingdom? To whom do we owe allegiance? To whom do we yield allegiance?

Revelation 22: 12 – 13

"Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End."

Jesus Christ will return to the earth as He left it – in the clouds. But He will not come as a Suffering Servant. He will at last have accomplished His work as the Savior of the world. He will not sacrifice Himself again your sins or mine – He does not have to – He has already died once, for all. No, this time He will come as Conqueror, King and Lord, and He will receive unto Himself those who are His servants (that is, those who have in their lifetimes on earth heard and read His Words and done what these require of them).

And what of those who claim, yet reject, His Lordship? Again, His Words are plain. They will 'go away to eternal punishment.'

What a day of astonishment will be the Day of Judgment for those who, in life, have treated our Lord and our King as if He were some kind of civil servant or elected official, over whom they assumed a constitutionally guaranteed veto power!