

STUDIES IN REVELATION

BY GLENN PEASE

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1. THE BEGINNING OF THE END Based on Rev. 1:1-2

The Apostle John is the patron saint of everybody, for he is the hero of young and old alike. Jesus called him to be His disciple when he was likely in his late teens. He was the youngest of the 12, and is an example of the faith that Christ had in young people. John also lived the longest of the 12. He was used of God for service right to the end, and so he is also an example of the value of older people in discipleship. God used him to write down the last of the books of the Bible.

When the government looks for a man to go into space they select a man of maturity, but not a man of old age. When God sought for a man to travel to heaven and see mysteries beyond what any astronaut has ever seen in space, He choose a man well past our retirement age. John was a senior citizen, but it was no rocking chair for him. He had an assignment far bigger than anyone ever had. He was to be the recorder and reporter of the greatest revelation every given. God does not discriminate against the aged. God is an equal opportunity employer. He uses young and old alike. He has no retirement requirement, but will go on using a person as long as they live.

Your young men will see visions and your old men will dream dreams is the word of the prophet. Nobody is to be left out in the task of fulfilling God's plan. This last book of the Bible is an

encouragement to all to plan to be used of God at any age. We should expect to do something great for the Kingdom even when we are old. Alexander Maclaren wrote his famous Exposition of Holy Scripture after he was 80. DaVinci was 77 when he painted the Last Supper. Tennyson was 81 when he wrote Crossing the Bar. The world is full of great works done by those who were old, and we are studying one of the greatest of these works of the aged as we study Revelation. John was an old man, but still a capable instrument in the hands of God.

The first lesson we learn from this last book of the Bible is from the author. We learn that every year of our lives should be a year of labor for the Lord, and a year of expectation that He will use us for His purpose. The rest of life can be the best of life is to be our motto at any age. Studies reveal that the reason people get tired and fatigued in old age is not because of exhaustion but because of stagnation. Life demands labor and expression. If we settle down to do nothing, we stop the springs of energy and lose our motivation. If we keep on going and doing things, the waters of life's energy keep flowing. John never stopped being active. He was always available for God's service and the result was, he was used to his dying day.

John is not only a great example of love, but a great example of labor. He never did retire from Christian service, and God used him to give the world this greatest of books-The Revelation of Jesus Christ. In these opening verses he tells us of the source of the revelation; the subject of the revelation, and the servants to whom the revelation is given. Let's consider first-

I. THE SOURCE OF THE REVELATION.

Notice it is not from John as the title in the King James Version might imply. It is not the revelation of St. John the divine. That title was added by man. John tells us it is the revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave Him. In other words, the ultimate source of this revelation is God the Father. He gave it to His Son and His Son gave it to His angel, and the angel gave it to John, and John gave it to us, the body of Christ. We see here a 5 rung ladder, as when an owner gives a plan to his son, and the son takes it to the manager, and the manager gives it to the foreman who lays it out for the workers. God may use many means to communicate with man, but he always begins with His Son who is the Word. He is the first and the last, the alpha and omega. Everything God does begins and ends with Jesus.

This book is not what John the Apostle is teaching us, but what our Lord, the master teacher, wants us to know, for it is the revelation of Jesus Christ. We must approach this book with minds focused on Him, and with the prayer in our hearts that He will teach us.

Hushed by the noise and the strife of the schools,
Volume and pamphlet, sermon and speech,
The lips of the wise and the prattle of fools,
Let the Son of man teach.

Who has the key to the future but He?
Who can unravel the knots of the skein?
We have groaned and have travailed and sought to be free.
We have travailed in vain.

Bewildered, dejected and prone to despair,
To Him, as at first, do we turn and beseech
Our ears are all open, give heed to our prayer,
O Son of man, teach.

Author unknown

As mysterious as is much of this book, the main concepts can be grasped by everyone. Jesus is the door that invites us in, and not a door that locks us out. A revelation means an unveiling of what is hidden. In this book Jesus opens up the door to the future and lets us see what His plan and purpose is, and how He intends to wrap it all up. It tells us how He will reward His bride and judge those who serve the cause of evil. It is a revelation of how men will journey through history to either heaven or hell. Genesis tells us how Satan began his work on earth, and Revelation tells us how he will end in doom. Genesis tells us how sin brought man's fall, and Revelation tells us the ultimate consequence of sin. Genesis tells us how everything got started, and Revelation tells us how everything will end. It is a fitting climax to the Bible.

We need to keep before us, that the source of this revelation is God, and it is a revelation of Jesus Christ, and so our first objective is not to know the future and satisfy our curiosity. Our first objective is to know Christ. This revelation is to primarily lead us back to the source and draw us near to Him who gave it. Our prayer should be-

Lord Jesus, make Thyself to me
A living, bright reality;
More present to faith's vision keen
Than any outward object seen;
More dear, more intimately nigh
Than even the sweetest earthly tie.

Author unknown

II. THE SUBJECT OF THE REVELATION.

To show to His servants what must soon take place. The subject than, is the future. We are dealing with prophecy and the prediction of what is to come. Henry Swete says, "Revelation is the converse of concealment, the process of casting aside the veil that hides a mystery." We could never know the things in this book if God had not revealed them. Everyone likes to be in on a secret, and Jesus is letting His people in on the secrets of the future. Not all secrets are sweet however. Some of them are bitter such as the revealing of God's wrath and the terrible judgment ahead. Even the negatives can be an encouragement, however, if we see them properly.

This is illustrated by the two Rabbis who approached Jerusalem and saw a fox. Rabbi Joshua began to weep and Rabbi Eliezer began to laugh. "Why do you laugh?" asked Joshua. "Nay, but why do you weep?" came the reply. "Because, I see the prophecy of Lamentations fulfilled." "Because of the Mount Zion, which is desolate, the foxes walk upon it." Eliezer said, "For that same reason do I laugh, for when I see with my own eyes that God has fulfilled His judgments to the letter, I have thereby a pledge that not one of His promises will fail, for He is even more ready to show mercy than judgment." Even the negative fulfillment's remind us of the certainty of His

promises.

Many times I have used the saying that we don't know what the future holds, but we know who holds the future. This is true in terms of our own personal lives, but when it comes to events which affect the whole world, we do know what the future holds, for that is what this revelation is all about. John stresses two things about these future events.

1. THEIR NECESSITY.

He says they must soon take place. This is not a revelation of what ought to be, or of what God hopes will be. This is a sure thing, and it must come to pass. This is not a series of predictions like you read in one of the papers by a contemporary psychic. They make a lot of educated guesses and a few wild ones for publicity, and once in a while they get one right. The test of any prophecy is, if it does not come to pass it is false, and the prophet is a false prophet. Any careful study of the so called prophets of our day show them to be false. If John's prophecy is truly from God, then it will not be 60%, or even 99.9% correct, but completely 100% accurate. John says these things must come to pass-it is a necessity.

2. THEIR NEARNESS.

They must soon come to pass. This word soon is the basis for the first debate over the book. Since many Christians feel most of the book is yet to be fulfilled in the future, they give the word soon a different meaning here than its usual meaning. They say that since from the Lord's point of view a thousand years is as a day, that means it has only been a couple of days since this revelation was given. So that leaves several thousand years yet for the fulfillment to come even in what would be only one week from God's perspective. That is very soon to Him. Others say the word means speedily, for it is used this way in Luke 18:8 where it says, "He will vindicate them speedily." They stress that when the Lord begins to fulfill these prophecies they will come in rapid succession and soon be fulfilled.

Many others resist trying to get around the plain meaning of the word. They prefer to take it as it stands and see that John is saying to the Christians of his day-these things will take place in your lifetime. After all, the other two great Apostles, Paul and Peter, said the same thing. Paul in Rom. 13:12 wrote, "The night is far gone, the day is at hand." Peter wrote in I Pet. 4:7, "The end of all things is at hand." There is no way to escape the fact that the Bible authors felt the end is near, and that Christ would soon return.

We are caught, therefore, in a dilemma. It is clear that the word soon meant soon to John and the early Christians. Yet, we know that the end did not come, and 2,000 years later we have not come to the end. What are we suppose to think? The solution is really quite simple. You merely recognize that both views are right, for it is a part of the nature of Biblical prophecy. George Eldon Ladd, the prophetic scholar wrote, "It is the nature of Biblical prophecy to make it possible for every generation to live in expectancy of the end." Each generation of Christians can see the events of this book fulfilled in their lifetime. History goes in circles until one day the final round will be made, and the literal end will come. No generation knows for sure that it is the last, but each one could be.

As we study this book we first of all must try to see what it meant to the Christians of the first

century. Then we must try to see what it has meant to Christians through history. And finally how does it apply today, and what does it mean for its final fulfillment at the end of history which could possibly be in our lifetime. The reason this revelation causes so much debate is because so many Christians want to take it for themselves and leave all other generations of Christians out of it. They want it to be for the first century Christians, or for the Christians of the last day only. These exclusive theories are not wrong, for both are right, but it is just that they are too narrow and limited.

As we read through the book, we will be following those who see this as a revelation to all God's people with meaning to every generation from the first to the last. This means that soon means just that in every generation. The events of this book are always just around the corner for every generation. Jesus could have returned in any century. If this was not the case, then the waiting Christians who have lived in expectation for centuries have been deceived. The Bible says they were right to have been watching, for His coming is always near.

The third thing we want to look at is-

III. THE SERVANTS TO WHOM THE REVELATION IS GIVEN.

This revelation was not given to idle curiosity seekers, but to those who are servants of Christ. It is a servants manual and not just a guide to prophecy nuts who love to get into speculation about all the details of the future. It is primarily practical in its purpose. It is to aid Christians in their service for Christ. It is to be a blessing to those who keep what is written says John. If one does not serve Christ and live a more practical life of benefit to others because of this book, he has missed the purpose of it, and poverty of purpose is worse than poverty of purse. Only those who serve can really see the future and be motivated by this revelation, for they alone can see that their labor is not in vain in the Lord.

Barclay rightly says, "No man can be anything greater than a servant of God." This is the name first given to Christians in this book and it is the title that John and all of the Apostles proudly wear. God lets his servants in on his plea for the future, for if they are going to suffer for His Word and even give their lives in His service, it is only right that they should share in knowing the outcome of it all. The Christians who will get most out of this revelation are those who are most anxious to serve Christ in the world, and keep the things written in this book. Frank Laubach said something so simple yet so profound: "It would be better for us to throw away 99% of our learning and of our tangled philosophy and stick to just one single thing for our daily life-to keep asking God, who needs me next, Father!"

Whatever we learn from the study of this book will be worthless if it does not make us better servants. If growing in knowledge does not lead to growth in service, we will have missed the whole point of this book. On the other hand,, if we fail to grasp some of the mysteries and are wrong on some of our interpretations, but we are motivated to greater service, we will have accomplished the primary purpose for which this revelation was given. So our prayer should be, Lord, help us to see and then obey, as we launch into this study of the beginning of the end.

2. THE BLESSED LIFE Based on Rev. 1:3

The famous medical missionary Dr. Grenfell of Labrador once came to John Hopkins Hospital in America looking for a head nurse to go back to Labrador with him. He made this appeal: "If you want to have the time of your life, come with me and run a hospital next summer for the orphans of the Northland. There will not be a cent of money in it for you, and you will have to pay your own expenses. But I guarantee that you will feel a love for life you have never before experienced. It's having the time of anyone's life to be in the service of Christ." The nurse who responded wrote this after she came back to America: "I never knew before that life was good for anything but what one could get out of it. Now I know that the real fun lies in seeing how much one can put into life for others."

She learned that the blessed life is the life of the servant. This is one of the major truths of the Bible, and one that John stresses in this book of Revelation. The first chapter and the last chapter have the same emphasis: This is a revelation to servants, and blessedness is found in the keeping of what is revealed. Listen to Rev. 22:6-7 which shows you how the last chapter sounds so much like the beginning of the first chapter. "And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to sow His servants what must soon take place. And behold I am coming soon. Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book." From beginning to end this book is for servants, and the blessing is found in doing.

In this third verse of the first chapter John spells out most fully the actions that lead to the blessed life. The three things you can do with this book that leads to blessings are: You can read it; you can hear it, and you can keep it. Readers, hearers, and keepers, are the three kinds of servants who will reap the benefits of this revelation. Before we look closer at these three actions, we need to look at the implication of this verse as a whole. This verse makes this the most unique book in all the Bible. All Scripture is profitable, therefore, there is a blessing connected with reading, hearing, and obeying any part of it, but this is the only part of Scripture where it is plainly stated.

This is the first of seven beatitudes in the book, and is the most comprehensive. Every Christian in history has this blessing as a potential for his life. There are exceptions, like the thief on the cross, who never had a chance to even see the book, and likely there are many others in history who also did not have a chance to see it. But the fact remains, Christians of every generation have had the chance to enter into this blessing. This makes the interpretation of this book, by necessity, a book that has to be a meaningful one to every generation of Christians. If it is not, this promised blessing is a farce and a mockery. If only the first Christians could understand it, then the blessing is meaningless to all the Christians since. And if only the last generation of Christians can grasp it, then this blessing has been meaningless to all the Christians through history.

There is just no alternative to this conclusion: If we are to take this blessing as a legitimate promise to all readers, hearers, and keepers, then it must be a revelation that is relevant to all Christians of all time. How can you keep what has no meaning to you? How can you be blessed by reading what makes no sense because it is not meant for you, but for Christians of some other age? There is only one way you can do justice to this third verse, and that is to recognize that it makes this book a now book for all time. The very first Christians who received it entered into the blessed

life, and the very last who receive it will enter into the blessed life. The blessed life is not all out there in the future when the world is coming to an end. The whole point of a revelation of the future is to bring the blessings of the future back into the present so we can begin to enjoy them now. The best is always yet to be, but the better is always near for those who know what that best to be is.

Realized Eschatology is what the scholars call it. It simply means that the future can greatly influence the present in the lives of those who live now with eternity's values in view. They begin now to experience in some measure the blessings that God has prepared for those who love and serve Him. If a man gets a letter telling him that the girl he loves is going to say yes when he proposes next week, that knowledge of the future affects how he lives that week. He is already enjoying the future.

This verse says that the blessed life is now. The overall theme of the book is the conflict of Christ and Satan, good and evil, light and darkness. We don't have to wait until the battle is over to enjoy the fruits of victory. Christ wants to live in us and gain victories now over the forces of evil. We might even become martyrs in the conflict, but this book makes clear that if we do, it only leads us more quickly to be crowned, and to join the battle in the spiritual realm even nearer to Christ. No matter how fierce the conflict, and no matter how rough the persecution, Christians must recognize that the blessed life is now. Any interpretation of this book that robs any Christian of any age of this opening blessing is missing the mark. We are dealing with a perpetual now book, and the important thing about this revelation about the future is, how does it affect our now? How does our knowledge of God's plan and purpose for the future alter our present character and conduct? The first thing we have to do to allow the future to change the present is to enter into the three-fold blessing of this verse. The first blessing is on-

I. THE READER.

The first thing we need to observe is that this blessing is designed to fit the specific situation of the first century Christians. The reader is singular. "Blessed is he who reads." The hearers, however, are plural, for it is they that hear. We have a clear picture of the public service where one reads the Word and the congregation listens. The reading here is not the private reading in your home, but the public reading in the church. In the early church where there was only one copy of the book, no one had a copy to read at home in private. It would have been meaningless to offer a blessing to those who read the book to themselves at home, for no one could do that. The Living Bible; the RSV, and other modern translations stress the public reading by translating: "Blessed is he who reads aloud." It is not a silent private reading that being referred to here.

The implication of this is clear. This book is meant for a group experience. It is guide for the body in its decisions and strategies for doing the will of Christ in history. It is not designed as a devotional guide for personal devotions like the book of Psalms or Proverbs. It is to be a public standard for the guidance of the church as a whole. In verse 4 John addresses the seven churches of Asia, and the second and third chapters deal with Christ's view of the church. What this means then, on the practical level, is that the principles of this book are to guide us as a body. This book is to be more important to us as a local congregation of believers than our constitution. Here we have a revelation of how our Lord, the Head of the church, feels about what goes on in His church. He is to determine what theology we teach; what actions we take, and what attitudes we express toward our

world.

In order to guarantee that the Lord's view of the church might never be lost, He made it a blessing for churches of all ages to have this book read and heard publicly in the worship service. This does not mean there is no value in reading the book in private. It is just that the blessing is designed to keep this book as an open and public guide to the local church all through history. The leader or reader may be a pastor or a layman who keeps this guide before the body by reading it in public, and he is blessed for doing so. The other two categories of blessing are really one, for to be a hearer and not a keeper of the Word is a curse rather than a blessing, and so we can link them together and call them-

II. HEARER-KEEPERS.

The obvious reason why it is a blessing to hear this book read is because you thereby become informed on the mind of Christ. You are then able to live in obedience to His will. The reverse truth is also obvious. It is a curse to be in the dark and not know what your Lord's will is. To be in a battle and not know what your commander's goals and objectives are is to be an aid to the enemy, and a stumbling block to your fellow soldiers in the faith. If we are ignorant as a local church as to what Christ expects of us, we can burn up all of our energy doing things that do not accomplish His purpose. As we shall see, it is possible for a local church to be in just that kind of situation. To avoid it we must be hearers of this portion of the Word and doers.

The ear gate was the primary means of receiving the Word of God in the early church, and the preached Word is still the main means for most Christians to be exposed to the truths which Christ wants the church to hear. This means that good listening habits are important for Christians to develop. Boredom is not always the fault of the speaker. Quite often the listeners are lethargic. They do not take the message seriously enough to overcome the distractions and the tiredness that makes the mind drift and sink into a stupor where the message does not penetrate.

This verse is saying, it will be a blessing for those Christians who take this revelation serious enough to fight all obstacles to good listening so that they can hear what Christ has to say to the church. Over and over we will see the phrase in chapter two and three: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the spirit says to the churches." In other words, you can have an ear and still not hear. It is the hearing that leads to understanding and obedience. The good listener is one who is always asking questions about what he hears. How does this apply to me and my church? What can we do to live up to this ideal of Christ? You must be looking for insights as you listen. Those who do listen will hear what the inattentive will miss and lose their blessing. Good listening enables you to find gems of truth that the speaker is not even talking about. Good listening will enable you to see things that the speaker doesn't see such as, implications that apply to you that the speaker knows nothing about.

Our understanding and interpretation of this revelation may be immature, but that is part of the process of growing. We must see on a lower level before we can see on a higher level. Our interpretation will become more clear as we respond in obedience to the highest we can grasp at the time. Child like misunderstanding will be corrected as we share what we see and hear. Our own experience will be corrected by the wider experience of the body. A little boy visiting the farm walked through a flock of chickens, and suddenly the rooster flopped his wings and let forth with a

crow. The boy ran to the house and gave this interpretation of his experience: He said the rooster spanked himself and then cried. From his perspective that seemed the most logical interpretation of the event. It was not accurate, but as he listened to others explain he would grow in his understanding.

The point I am making is, the blessing of this book revolves around a group experience. The important thing is not what I learn, or what you learn, but rather, how does this revelation affect us as a church? How will we respond to what we learn about Christ's will for the local church? It is a body-life experience. We must share how we feel about what is revealed to us, for only as we do can we keep what is written.

In 1959 Hans Kraus bought a 13th century copy of Revelation for \$182,000. That was a world record, and doubtless Hans will keep that copy after he reads it, but that is not the kind of keeping John has in mind. Hans may be blessed to have that 13th century copy of the book, but that is not the blessing John speaks of here. Keeping means doing, or acts of obedience because of what is written in this book. This means the goal of this book, like the goal of all Christian education, is to change conduct so that it conforms to the will of Christ. This means the book has principles that are universal for all Christians in every age.

A Mrs. R. L. Bartlett received a postcard 42 years after it had been mailed from only 6 miles away. It said, "Will be down Monday about 5:00 P.M. Do not stay at home on my account. Hope your cold is better." It was totally irrelevant when she got it, and of less value than yesterday's paper. The point is, once a message no longer fits the situation in which you live, it is a worthless message. The book of Revelation is not like the paper. Some say it is as current as the daily news. Not so! It is far more relevant than that. The daily news is only relevant for a few hours, and then it is obsolete. Revelation is relevant always to all believers in all churches, for the principles of life it reveals can be kept by all who will choose to do so at all times.

Satan will be delighted if our goal is only to satisfy our curiosity about the future. C. S. Lewis in *Screwtape Letters* has Satan telling one of his demons how to succeed in deceiving a Christian: "The great thing is to prevent his doing anything. Let him do anything but act. No amount of piety in his imagination and affection will harm us if we can keep it out of his will-the more often he feels without acting, the less he will be able ever to act, and, in the long run, the less he will be able to feel." If Satan can get us to feel excited about his book so that we are content with just feeling good because we are learning more, but keep us from changing our lives in response to what we learn, he will have succeeded in robbing us of the promise blessing.

G. K. Chesterton, the great Catholic author, scolded the church of his day in poetry because of their failure to take practical action to meet the needs of the community. He wrote,

The Christian Social Union here
Was very much annoyed;
It seems there is some duty
Which we never should avoid,
And so they sing a lot of hymns
To help the unemployed.

To keep what is written in this book is to be practical. To remember the Sabbath and keep it holy was not just a motto to the people of God in the Old Testament. In order to keep it holy they had to do many things, or refrain from many things. To keep the Sabbath was primarily a matter of conduct. To keep the things revealed in this book is likewise a matter of conduct. We are not true believers of what we hear revealed until it affects our lives. Paul Johnson put it: "A belief is a faith not merely when it is accepted as true, but when it determines what one shall live for and shapes the way of living."

Adoniram Judson in 1812 sailed to Burma to carry the Gospel there. He suffered greatly as he was imprisoned for two years. Starved and beaten, yet he survived, but with his hands and feet marred by the chains. He went to the king of Burma and asked permission to preach. The king responded, "I am willing for a dozen preachers to go, but not you. Not with those hands. My people are not such fools as to take notice of your preaching, but they will take notice of them." Judson was effective, and is now a famous hero in the history of missions because he was a keeper of the things Christ revealed to His church.

This last book of the Bible starts with the same principle with which the book of Genesis starts. It is a test of obedience. Will Adam and Eve keep the will of God by obedient conduct? They did not! Now, each member, and each church in the body of Christ has the same option. Will we, or will we not, keep God's Word by obedient conduct. The promise for those who do is an entrance into the Blessed Life.

3. THE SEVEN CHURCHES Based on Rev. 1:4

A math teacher asked one of her less enthusiastic students, "If I take 23 away from 30, what is the difference?" He responded, "That's what I say, what's the difference?" In other words, it made no difference to him. Not everybody enjoys math and working with numbers, and you certainly do not need much knowledge in this area to understand the Bible. John was no great mathematician, but there is one number he used over and over again, and that was the number 7. The whole book of Revelation is built around the number 7. It is used 54 times in this book, and is the key number that forms the structure of the book.

John was not the first to use 7 this way, for 7 has been the number of perfection and completion all through history. The Greeks and Romans considered it a sacred number, but long before them the Chinese divided their empire into 7 provinces. In India the earth was divided into 7 divisions, and they had the 7 rivers of Hindustan, and 7 celestial mountains. The Babylonians made much of the number 7, and they referred to all gods as the 7 gods, and their 7 story tower was symbolic of the whole universe.

The idea of 7 being symbolic of perfection and completion is almost universal, and, therefore, it is the easiest of all symbolic numbers to understand. It usually means all of the category being dwelt with in the context. God has built this right into creation.

7 days make a complete week.

7 colors make a complete rainbow.

7 whole tones make a complete scale with the 8th a repetition of the first.
7 seas, 7 wonders of the world, 7 years and the body is renewed.
7 days of rest.
7 day feast.
7th day for circumcision.
7 fold sprinkling of blood on the day of atonement.
7 branch candlestick.
7 times dipping of Naaman.
7 years labor for Rachel.
7 years of famine and 7 years of plenty.
7 last words from the cross.
7 baskets of fragments.
7 husbands of one wife.
7 demons cast out of Mary Magdalene.
7 deacons.
7 parables of Matt. 13.
7 woes on the Pharisees.
7 times 70 for forgiveness.

We could go on and on for there are 600 references to the number 7 in the Bible. There is no point in trying to prove what is obvious to everyone. 7 is a symbolic number which stands for totality. It gets this meaning because it is a combination of three and four. Three represents the trinity, or heaven, and four represents the earth because of the four directions and four seasons. 7 is the combination of heaven and earth, or the total reality.

This means that when John in verse 4 addresses the 7 churches in Asia, he is addressing the total church, or all churches for all time. These 7 actual churches of his day are representative of all the local churches that will exist through all of history. Just as the 7 spirits before the throne represent the Holy Spirit in the fullness of all his functions. One of the popular systems of interpreting the book of Revelation is the system that sees the whole book as 7 great visions, each of which starts at the first coming of Christ and ends with the second coming. Whether this theory is correct or not I cannot say, but it definitely has some truth to it which we will observe as we go through the book.

Another popular method of interpretation based on the number 7 is that each of the 7 churches represents a period of history. Again, there is some truth to this theory, but to press it only leads to a lot of contradiction, for no two who follow this theory seem to be able to agree on what period of history each church represents. It is wise just to recognize that in every period of history the church falls into one of the 7 categories represented by the 7 churches. In fact, the church today world wide has local churches that fall into everyone of the 7 kinds. The idea that all churches of any age fall into the same category is based on ignorance of church history. The church may be dead in one part of the world, and in great revival in another part.

Some people get so excited about numerology that they go to extremes. I have several books in my library devoted to finding 7's in the Bible. This is an old hobby and goes back into ancient Judaism. They actually get down to the very letters of the Hebrew and Greek. For example, Gen. 1:1 has 7 Hebrew words made up of 28 letters, or 4 times 7. The first three words have 14 letters or 2 times 7, and the last 4 words have 14 letters or 2 times 7, and on and on it goes with dozens of

combination of 7 right in the first verse of the Bible. They go on through the whole Bible finding 7 absolutely everywhere. Some men have spent their whole life finding the 7's in the Bible in every conceivable combination; all of which is much ado about nothing. J. B. Segal writes, "Statistics of the Bible, like the calculations of the Great Pyramid of Egypt, have a fatal attraction for cranks and crackpots, and even for wise men in their less guarded moments."

We must beware of the danger of getting all excited about numbers, for as John Davis points out in his *Biblical Numerology*, the Bible nowhere tells us that it has any special hidden meaning in numbers. He feels that the number 7 is the only significant symbolic number in Scripture, and it has a clear and obvious meaning to all-completeness. Even here we need to remember that it can also mean completely evil and does not always mean perfect in a good sense. In 13:1 the great beast has 7 heads, and so 7 can be complete for either good or evil.

As we focus our attention on the 7 churches of Asia who first received this book, we need to remember that though they are representative of all churches, they were also real churches. This book is anchored in history. No interpretation can be very convincing if it does not face up to the fact that it was originally given to the 7 historic churches. The fact that there were other well known churches in the same area, such as Colosse, Galatia, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, Antioch, and Miletus, makes it clear that 7 is used symbolically for all churches. We are not opening and reading other people's mail, therefore, but just as Paul wrote his letters to 7 specific churches which are guides to all the churches of history, so this revelation to the 7 churches is for all the churches of history.

As we look at the greeting of John to the churches, it is a typical greeting of the New Testament Epistles. Grace and peace are the two things all of need perpetually. The fact that we even need God's grace is evidence that apart from God's favor we can never make our own lives meaningful and effective. The fact that we need His peace is evidence that we live in a disturbing world where nothing is ever alright. This life is a battle-field in contrast to the joy, victory, and peace of the new heaven and new earth. The book of Revelation does encourage us to look ahead to that great eternal peace. Grace Crowell in *Songs Of Hope* wrote:

Lift up your hands, make straight the paths,
Though dark the way may seem,
Ahead are the orchards bright in the sun
Where the golden apples gleam.
Let no bitterness trouble your heart,
For after the night is passed,
The gold and the scarlet, rain-washed fruit,
Of peace will be yours at last.

This is a legitimate hope of the believer, but John in this greeting is saying, the grace and peace of God can be ours now. We can have some of the future in the present because the God of the future is also the God of the present. John describes God as the one who is, who was, and who is to come. Anytime and anywhere, one thing is sure, God is there. This first description of God in the book also anchors this book in history, for it describes God as the God of history. He is the God of the past, the future, and the now. History is God centered, but this is not always clear except to those who have this revelation of how God is active in history.

Note that God is on a throne. It is referred to here in verse 4, but in chapter 4 we have a description of God on His throne. This becomes a basis for the church to enter into the grace and peace of God now, even before the final victory over evil. This message of peace in a world of turmoil, due to the fact that God is on the throne, is to many, the key purpose of this whole book. It was written to strengthen and encourage Christians going through persecution by making it clear to them that no matter how bad things get on earth, God still is on the throne, and whether we live or die we are in his hands.

William Justice in his book *Our Visited Planet* tells of the physics professor describing to his college class the laws of motion. He described how each of the planets with their moons were in regular motion around the sun; how the earth itself was spinning on its axis over 1000 miles per hour, and at the same time sailing around the sun at 18 and one half miles per second. While this is going on, the sun itself is speeding on its massive flight through space at the velocity of 43,000 MPH carrying all the planets, their satellites, thousands of asteroids, a thousand comets and millions of meteors with it toward the great star Vega. The class was almost frightened with all of this movement, but he said ever this does not exhaust the matter. The Milky Way, our own galactic system, which is 100,000 light years across is turning at an incredible speed about an axis located in the direction of the constellation Sagittarius. This system is so immense it takes 200,000,000 years to rotate once on the axis. At this point the professor paused and with impressive solemnity said, "Young ladies and young gentlemen, every object in the universe known to man is in motion except the throne of God."

What that professor stated is one of the key truths of the book of Revelation, and because it is so, the peace of God is possible for the believer to experience in the present. Again, let me remind you, this is a new book for all Christians of every age because it is a revelation of the God who always is. Because he is the God who is, He is always involved in history. R.T. France calls Him the Transcendental Interferer. He means by that, that God is a Living God—a God who does not ignore history, but a God who gets involved in history. A God of the New Testament is the same God as the Jehovah of the Old Testament. He is going to be present in history leading His people to accomplish His will in the world. He also has His hand on non-Christian people's, and works out His will through them as well, even as He did in the Old Testament. It was not just Israel that God delivered. In Amos 9:7 God says, "Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir?"

Any view of God that limits His involvement in history to His own people is too narrow to be Biblical, and is not worthy of the God of history. God tells us in the Old Testament that He was just as much the God of the nations as He was the God of Israel. In Isa. 10:5 He calls Assyria, "The rod of my anger." He used Assyria to judge His people in Israel. In Jer. 25:8-9 God says, "Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon my servant." The reason I stress this Biblical truth at the beginning of our study of Revelation is to caution you against any interpretation of the book that sees it only from an American perspective, as if what happens to us is all that really matters to God. I am rather inclined to believe Wilbur Smith, the great evangelical scholar in the area of prophecy, who says in his book *You Can Know The Future*, "I am sure that there is no particular prophecy about the U.S., although many books have been written on this...." We must see God as the God of all history and not limit Him to our experience of history, or our knowledge of history. He is the God of all history.

This three-fold description of God, plus the mention of the three Persons of the Trinity in verses 4 and 5, brings us to another favorite number in numerology. God has built this number into His creation also. Time is three fold with past, present and future. You have earth, air, and water; mother, father, and child; length, breadth, and depth; day is divided in morning, noon, and night. You have right, middle, and left; you have high, medium, and low. There are numerous threes that deal with completeness and totality just as the number 7 does. The Bible has many series of threes. The three sons of Noah that populated the whole new world; the three friends of Job; the three night watches; the three temptations of Jesus, and the three prayers in Gethsemane, and three disciples and the inner circle; the three denials of Peter; the three fold holy, holy, holy of the Seraphim; the three graces of love, hope and faith; the three languages above the cross; the three hours of darkness on the cross; the three days and nights in the grave; etc.

The practical value we can get from numerology is the assurance that our God is able to handle the problems that plague us and make life such a mystery. He is pictured here in Revelation as both three-fold and seven-fold: The two numbers that represent perfection and completeness. God is lacking in nothing, and faith in such a God says, even though I do not grasp what is happening in history, I trust in Him who is over all, and He will make sense of it all to those who do trust Him. Donald Gray Barnhouse points out that this is the only place in the Bible where the order of the Trinity is not Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Here it is Father, Holy Spirit, and in verse 5, the Son. It is clear why this is the case, for John goes on to say much of the Son. The Father and Holy Spirit are just mentioned here, but the rest of the of chapter deals with the Son. The focus of this revelation is on the Son.

4. THE KING IS COMING Based on Rev. 1:7

Joanna Baillie, an English dramatic poet of the last century, told the touching tale of a maiden whose lover had gone off to the Holy Land. The report had come back that he had been slain. She refused to believe he would not return to her, and so every night she kindled a fire on the shore of the Mediterranean and watched for his return to take her to be his bride.

The story is a parable of the church and her lover, the Lord Jesus Christ. He too has gone away, but He promised to return, so the church waits in expectation for that day when the shout will be heard, "Behold the Bridegroom cometh," and she will be taken as a glorious bride to His mansion in the sky.

This theme of waiting for the return of one's lover is an ancient one. Homer in the Odyssey tells of the hero Ulysses who went off to the war of Troy, and spent ten adventurous years trying to get back home to his waiting wife. She was wealthy and the result was many men wanted to marry her. They insisted that her husband was dead, and that she was foolish to wait. She had to endure enormous pressure, but she remained faithful to her husband, and finally he did return to wreak vengeance upon those wicked men who sought to take advantage of his wife.

Again we see a parallel of what the church must endure as it waits for the return of Christ. The

world says forget this Jesus you wait for, and come make love with us. He is gone, and you are foolish to wait for Him, and miss the love of the world. Peter warned the early Christians about the world's attack on the hope of the second coming. In II Pet. 3:3-4 he writes, "First of all you must understand this, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own passions and saying, "Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the father's fell asleep, all things have continued as they were from the beginning of creation." By their scoffing they hoped to cause the Christians to give up their hope.

The Lord will return and wreak vengeance upon those who seek to entice His bride away. Those who try to lure the bride of Christ into the arms of the world need to hear the warning of the Word, for their will be hell to pay when the Bridegroom comes. II Thess. 1:6-10 says, "...God deems it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant rest with us to you who are afflicted, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance upon those who do not know God and upon those who do not obey the Gospel of our Lord Jesus. They shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and the glory of His might, when He come on that day to be gloried in His saints, and to be marveled at in all who have believed."

The second coming will be both a day of great joy, and a day of great judgment. The Bible alternates between these two pictures depending upon whose point of view by which it is seen-the Bride or the world. Christians are warned over and over again to watch for the coming of their Lord, for carelessness in this area can lead them to get so involved with the world that that day will come upon them like a thief in the night, and they will be caught naked and ashamed at His coming.

In other words, if the Bridegroom comes and finds His bride flirting with the world and embracing another lover, it will be a day of judgment rather than joy even for those believers who are not found faithful. But Jesus says in Luke 21:37, "Blessed are those servants whom the Lord when He cometh shall find watching." In order to motivate us to watch, we want to focus on this great text where John emphasizes these two aspects of the second coming. First we see-

I. THE REALITY OF HIS RETURN.

Behold He is coming says John. The faithful bride never questions the promise of her bridegroom to return and receive her unto Himself that where He is she might be also.

He'll come again,
And prove our hope not vain.
We wait the moment, Oh, so fair;
To rise and meet Him in the air,
His heart, His home, His throne to share,
O wondrous love!

Author unknown

This has been the blessed hope of the church from the day of its birth. This is the goal of history. It is the final leg of the tripod of history: Creation, crucifixion, and coming again. The prophets predicted it; the Lord Himself promised it, and the Apostles fervently preached it. The New

Testament refers to the second coming 318 times. Everybody who truly believes the Bible believes in the second coming, for to deny its reality is to deny the validity of Biblical revelation. Christians in every denomination, and people in every cult that studies the Bible, believe in the reality of Christ's return.

You would have a very difficult time finding anyone who rejects the second coming, except those who do not believe the Bible. The problem today is not unbelief, but too much belief. Modern Christians have developed so many different ways of looking at the second coming that it gets very confusing, not just to laymen, but even to the scholars. I have known pastors who became nervous wrecks over the doctrine of the second coming because there was so much truth in different systems in interpreting it. All the different views are held by outstanding leaders of the evangelical church. A whole new phenomenon is taking place. New books are coming out all the time with all of the views being presented by well known authors in the same book. This is a clear sign that Christians are finally becoming aware that it is likely that no one view has all the answers, but that there are values and insights in all of them that need to be considered by the whole body.

Charles Erdman in *Remember Jesus Christ* wrote, "...while there should be no doubt as to the reality of the personal glorious return of Christ, much diversity of views, regarding details and circumstances must be allowed." Those who go on dogmatically insisting that their view is the only true one only reveal their own intellectual dishonesty. I have studied all of the views and find Biblical values in each of them, and find that none of them is complete and without problems. There are so many passages in the Bible that deal with the Rapture, the Resurrection, and the Return from the point of view of the world, the church, and Israel, that nobody has ever been able to put them all together into a simple chart that explains them clearly.

So many things, both good and bad, are going to happen when Jesus returns that it is futile to try and get all of the events organized. Those who think they have done it only aggravate those who know the complexity of the second coming is beyond the charting of the human mind. Listen to the greatest Baptist preacher of all time, who read more widely possibly than any man who ever lived-Charles Haddon Spurgeon.

"As for the Lord's second coming, we know not when it shall be. Shall the world grow darker and darker till He comes? It may be so. There are passage of Scripture and signs of the times which may be taken to indicate it. On the other hand, shall the age grow brighter and brighter until He appears to bring the perfect day? Through the preaching of the Gospel shall there be periods in which multitudes shall be converted, and whole nations saved? I do not know: there are texts that seem to look that way, and many a brave worker hopes as much. There are brethren who can map out unfulfilled prophecy with great distinctness; but I confess my inability to do so. They get a shilling box of mathematical instruments. They stick down one leg of the compasses and describe a circle here and a circle there, and they draw two or three lines, and there it is. Can you not see it plainly? I am sick of diagrams;

I have seen enough to make another volume of Euclid. My impression is that very little is learned from the major part of these interpretations."

We could quote hundreds of the greatest minds of Christendom who stand with Spurgeon. They recognize there is probably an aspect of truth in almost everything that can be said about the second coming, and that is why they reject any narrow and limited man made scheme that pretends to lock Christ into a specific schedule. Some of the old prophetic preachers were very bold and dogmatic, but the wiser modern prophets have learned they cannot program God to do things their way, and so if you read their books today you will read a lot of maybe this could be, or possibly this could mean, or probably this indicates. There is a great caution today because too many godly men have made too many wild guesses in the past and have been wrong. Our blessed hope is not a hope of producing a perfect chart and schedule of the events of His coming. Our blessed hope is the reality of His coming.

Behold He is coming says John.

II. THE RESPONSE AT HIS RETURN.

This text emphasizes the main reason for the return of Christ, which is to judge the world. Every eye will see Him, and even those who pierced Him, and there will be a response of universal wailing. This picture of the coming of Christ as judge is the main theme of the Creeds of Christendom all through history. The Apostles' Creed declares that Christ "Ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty, from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead." The Nicene Creed affirms that Christ "Sitteth on the right hand of the Father. And He shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead." In the Athanasian Creed, the confession is similar: "Christ sitteth on the right hand of the Father from whence He shall come to judge the living and the dead." Dr. James Denny out of lifetime of study of the Word said, "If we are to retain any relationship to the New Testament at all, we must assert the personal return of Christ as Judge of all."

The articles of religion of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and also the fourth of the 39 articles of the Church of England read this way: Christ did truly rise again from the dead, and took again His body, with all things appertaining to the perfection of man's nature, where with he ascended into heaven, and there sitteth until He return to judge all men at the last day."

The Augsburg Confession of 1530 reads, "...in the consummation of the world, Christ shall appear to judge, and shall raise up all the dead, and shall give unto the godly and elect eternal life and everlasting joy; but ungodly men and the devils shall He condemn with endless torment." The New Hampshire Baptist confession of 1833 says, "We believe that the end of the world is approaching, and that at the last day Christ will descend from heaven and raise the dead from the grave to final retribution; that a solemn separation will then take place."

John seems to focus on the judgment of the world only, but the creeds and testimony we have just read stress that the judgment includes the believers as well as the unbelievers. In other words, this day of the greatest joy possible for Christians will be a day of wailing for many, for they did not give heed to the Word, but let themselves be enticed by the world. The result of their not watching will be that they will, along with the world, be caught naked when Christ comes as a thief in the night,

and they will be ashamed at His coming. There is no way to escape this conclusion as you read the warnings of the New Testament to Christians about being ready.

Paul wrote to Timothy in II Tim. 4:1-2 in the Living Bible, "And so I solemnly urge you urge you before God and before Christ Jesus-who will someday judge the living and the dead when He appears to set up His kingdom-to preach the Word of God urgently at all times, whenever you get the chance, in season and out, when it is convenient and when it is not. Correct and rebuke your people when they need it, encourage them to do right, and all the time feeding them patiently with God's Word." Paul is saying, the whole Christian ministry is to be performed in the light of Christ's coming as the Judge. To be ready for that day is the reason behind so much of what we do as a church.

Jesus has all power, and as King of Kings He could chose to just end history and judge the world and the church, but He does not chose to do it that way. He chooses to come back into history to vindicate those who have been faithful, and to make sure that total justice is accomplished. Jesus will not end history with any loose ends, but all will be wrapped up with neatness and order.

John stresses that every eye will see Jesus when He comes. Phillip Mauro, the great layman Bible commentator, whose many books on the last things are some of the best, says, "It is a part of God's plan for the future that every child of Adam's race shall have at least one look at Him who gave Himself a ransom for all." Mauro is taking John literally here that every eye will see Him. It is hard to avoid taking this statement literally, when he goes on to say, even those who pierced Him will be among those whose eyes will see Him. Those who pierced Jesus have long been disintegrated into dust. Their last sight of Jesus was His dead body being taken from the cross. John says that even those eyes, long blinded by death, will also behold His return in power and glory.

John was the only disciple at the cross. He saw the cruelty there as none other did. He alone tells us of the piercing of Jesus. It is likely that John in telling us that those who pierced Him will see Him along with the whole world, is emphasizing the universal justice that Jesus will bring as the Judge. Christians had to suffer so much injustice in John's day, and like Jesus they were unjustly condemned to torture and death. John comforts them by assuring them that every injustice will be brought before the Judge; even those who pounded the nails in His hands, and who pierced His side, will stand before Jesus as King of Kings.

This text of Rev. 1:7 gets us into the whole area of the resurrection of dead, and that of both believers and unbelievers. It is the unbelievers who are more in John's mind here, for he stresses the presence of those who pierced Jesus and the universal wailing. For every eye to see Jesus means that even the dead of all time will see His coming. When Jesus comes again there has to be a resurrection of all who have ever lived, or we could not take this text literally.

A seventh day Adventist view is that those who pierced Jesus are raised in a special resurrection to see Jesus coming, but they will die again and be raised later. This is not impossible, but it seems rather a strange thing for God to do, and it is extreme speculation. We are on safer ground to look to John to guide us and grasp more clearly what he is revealing. If we go to John's Gospel to a passage where he is dealing again with the coming of Christ in judgment, we get a confirmation of the fact that John means for us to take him literally when he says, every eye will see the Lord when He returns. This means that all who have ever lived and died on this planet will in on that climatic

event of history. It is beyond our comprehension to grasp the magnitude of this event, but John leaves us in no doubt that this is the case in John 5:28-29: "Do not marvel at this, for the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear His voice and come forth, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment."

Every person who has ever been will be beholding the Man of Glory when He comes in the clouds. As in Adam all die, so in Christ shall be made alive says the Apostle Paul. Does he really mean all? Yes! Even the most godless will see the second coming for the all who die in Adam is all inclusive, and so the all who will be made alive in Christ is also all inclusive. Hitler and Stalin will be there, and their eyes will behold Him and every knee will bow to His Lordship. All those who pierced Him will be there, and not just the Roman soldiers who sphere went through His side, but Nero who pierced the body of Christ time and time again as he martyred the early Christians. Thousands upon thousands of tyrants will there to witness the triumph of Him whom they mocked, and whose people they martyred.

No one will fully know what hell is like until this day when they see that the one they rejected is in reality the Lord of Life. No wonder John says there will be world wide wailing. It does not take much imagination to picture the reason why wailing will cover the face of the earth. Can you imagine the depth of the shock and sorrow that will grip those who had a chance for eternal life in Christ but instead trampled under foot the blood of the Savior and rejected this Jesus who now appears before them as the Ruler of the universe. The second coming will be literal hell on earth for those who do not love His appearing because they do not love Him.

Those who are not saved will be raised to life to see the Lord of Glory, but they will then be judged and cast into the lake of fire, which is called the second death. The second coming means the second death to those who are not ready, and that is why it is a time of wailing. Perfect justice will be done by the Judge of all the world. On the cross Jesus paid the penalty for the sin of all men. When He comes again He will reward those who accepted His sacrifice with the gift of eternal salvation. His condemnation will fall upon those who rejected it, and they will have to pay their own penalty. In the light of these truths we should be ever aware of this revelation that the King is Coming.

5. THE PRIORITY OF LOVE Based on Rev. 2:1-7

If someone asks you, "What is the modern name of the country where Paul was born?" Would you know?

If someone asked you, "What is the modern name of the country where Christians were first called Christians?" Would you know?

If someone asked you, "What is the modern name of the country where Noah's Ark landed and the new world began?" Would you know?

If someone asked you, "What is the modern name of the country which became the center of Christianity after the fall of Jerusalem, and which became the center of world power and spread of Christianity for 16 centuries?" Would you know?

The answer to all of these questions is the same: It is the land of Turkey. I must confess I had no idea that Turkey was a major Bible country, but the fact is, it is. All 7 of the churches Jesus sent letters to in this book of Revelation were in Asia Minor, which today is Turkey. The Hittites of the Old Testament developed this land. Abraham came here on the way to the Holy Land. It was famous in Greek history as the land where they deceived the city of Troy into taking their wooden horse in which were hidden some of their soldiers. They took this famous city, and the story is recorded in Homer's famous Iliad.

Turkey is the bridge between Europe and Asia, and it is famous for more than most of us realize. This is where Florence Nightingale paved the way for modern nursing. This is where Hippocrates the father of modern medicine came to work centuries before. Dr. Luke got his training here, and Paul spent most of his life here, and a great deal of his ministry was in this area. John the Apostle served the churches here, as did Timothy. Mary the mother of Jesus lived her last days and was buried here. When Constantine the Roman Emperor became a Christian he transferred the capital of the Empire from Rome to Constantinople in what is now Turkey. For 7 centuries, which is three times as long as the United States has existed, this was the center of world and Christian power.

The first ecumenical council where Christian leaders from all over the world met was in Nicaea in 325 A.D. There they established basic Christian doctrine held by all Christians to this day. Not only is a good portion of the New Testament written to churches in what is now Turkey, but out of that area has come the theological foundation for all the creeds of Christianity. Everyone of us has been greatly influenced by what happened in the land of Turkey. The reason I share this is two fold. First, because most Christians never think of it or hear of it. It is lost knowledge because we don't know history. Second, it becomes a startling piece of evidence as to the consequences of not listening to Jesus when he speaks to the church. Jesus warned these churches that if they did not listen they would be removed, and would no longer be lights in the world, and that is exactly what happened.

This center of the Christian faith was destroyed, and today it is 98% Moslem, and the Christian church has very little influence. The churches and even the cities are nothing but rubble and wasteland because the church stopped listening to her Lord, and went her own way just like the people of Israel did, and the glory of the Lord departed as it did from the temple of Israel.

The messages to the seven churches are vital to the survival of the church in any part of the world at any time in history. The lights of the church go out all through history and produce dark ages when Jesus is not heard and heeded. This background should make us realize how seriously we need to give heed to these letters of our Lord to the church. Most all of the churches of Turkey have been turned into Mosques or museums because they had ceased to listen. History teaches us that Jesus says what He means and He means what He says. We want to look at what He says to the first church-the church of Ephesus. This letter is really second Ephesus, for Paul wrote one of his most impressive letters to this church several decades earlier. It was a great church in a great city.

In the original list of the seven wonders of the world which goes back to the second century B.C. The second one on the list was the temple of Diana in Ephesus. Pliny the Roman Historian called it, "The most wonderful monument of Grecian magnificence." It took a 120 years to build it. It was 425 feet in length and 225 feet wide with 127 60 foot columns, each given by a different king so that all of Asia joined in the building of this temple to their favorite goddess. The Greeks called her

Artemis. Diana was her Roman name.

Ephesus was the city of greatest renown, and it was wealthy because people came from all over the world to see the temple. It was the Orlando, Florida of Asia Minor. Paul almost started a riot in Ephesus because one of the silversmiths by the name of Demetrius made silver shrines of Diana and sold them to the masses of tourists. Paul came along and said manmade gods are not gods at all. Demetrius, fearful of losing his money machine, stirred up the people and the whole story recorded in Acts 19 says the crowds became furious for two hours as they shouted, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians." The officials finally got them quieted down, but this gives you a glimpse of what life was like in the city of Ephesus. It was a pagan capital of worship, and with a temple which was awesome. In the shadow of one of the seven wonders of the world Paul establishes one of the seven churches in Revelation.

Ancient writer after ancient writer raved of the magnificence of Ephesus. It was the home of the world's most popular goddess. She had an army of priests and prophetesses, theologians, choristers, and even acrobats. What chance did a handful of Christians have in that environment. It would be like setting up a tent along side a great Cathedral and trying to compete. Paul knew it would be tough, and it was. He spent three years in a lecture hall having discussions everyday on the Christian way. The Apostle John followed Paul and gave leadership to this church. That area became the nursery of Christianity. After the fall of Jerusalem, Ephesus became the new center of Christianity.

Diana is a mere record of history known only to scholars, but the letter of Paul to the church of Ephesus, and the letter of Jesus to Ephesus are read and studied by people all over the planet. The once proud city is now a heap of ruins, and the church is gone, but the messages it brought forth from Paul and Jesus live on to challenge and change the church the world over.

Ephesus was the first of the seven churches to be addressed by the Lord of the church. It was the closest to the island of Patmos where John received the revelation. The seven churches were key churches in the area, but they were not all the churches that were there. There were many others, but these seven represent the total church as seven represents totality all through the book of Revelation. Jesus begins His revelation of the plan of God from the first century to the last century of history, and on into eternity with these messages to the churches. The reason is, the church is His key tool to change history and get people ready for His coming and the eternal kingdom. He does not have another plan. His church is His body, and by means of it He will fulfill His plan for this world.

The amazing thing we see in these letters is that they are far from being perfect instruments. Jesus was the perfect man and he fulfilled the will of God perfectly in His death and resurrection. But now as the Lord of the church He has to finish His work in history by means of His church, and it is still made up of people who live in a fallen world and who are yet far from perfected. All of the churches have defects, problems, and weaknesses. If you feel the church is not all it should be, that is not surprising, for Jesus felt the same about the early church. They had all kinds of problems, and some of them quite serious. Jesus was very critical of His churches, but it was always with the goal of getting them to repent, change, and become what they had the potential of becoming.

The first thing we need to learn from these letters is that the church needs to be in constant renewal, for it is a fallible human organization, and thus, it is in constant decay. It is a tool that is

getting dull all the time and needs perpetual sharpening if it is to get the job done that Jesus left it here to do. These were the cream of crop churches, but they had plenty of problems and were in need of revival. Every Christian alive is to be a overcomer, for that is a major theme in these letters. In Ephesus they were growing cool and losing their first love. Jesus says in verse 7, "To Him that overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life." Problems and bad attitudes of believers can be overcome and reversed. That is why these letters exist: To bring that very thing about, and make Christians of all churches perpetual overcomers.

At the conclusion of each of these letters you read of a reward to be given to those who are overcomers. Overcoming sins and weaknesses is what being a Christian is all about. It is basic ministry of the church to be ever engaged in overcoming all of the things that make Christians less than the ideal tool Jesus needs to get His purpose done in this lost world. Even to the most deficient church of the lot-the church of Laodicea, which was making Jesus sick so that He was about to spit them out of His mouth, He concludes in 3:21, "To him who overcomes, I will give the right to set with Me on My throne, just as I overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne." The worst can still have the best. The church, no matter how short of the mark, can still be an overcomer and succeed in fulfilling the purpose of Christ in the world.

The Lord of the church is optimistic about the church and its potential for perpetual renewal. It is always going to the dogs, and Christians are cooling off and following some fool fad or heresy, but Jesus is ever ready to forgive and restore and use this fallible tool for His glory and the salvation of the world. Jesus never gives up on the church, for it is a living organism, and it can listen, respond, repent, change, and get back on track, even when it goes astray and is part of the problem instead of part of the solution to this world's mess.

The church is just people, a great variety of just ordinary people. There are people with varied gifts and personalities, but everyone of them not yet perfected. So when you get a number of them together they do not create perfection. If two wrongs don't make a right why should 200 make a right? Church is never wholly right or ideal and free of defects. If you find one you should let the Lord know right away because He never found one in His search. There are no perfect churches in the New Testament, and it is safe to assume there never has been such a church. Every church can be criticized, and it is valid to do so, but to be Christlike about it the goal of the criticism is to be constructive so as to help them to be overcomers.

You do not forsake your yard because weeds or dandelions began to take over. You work to make it better. You do not throw away your car when it gets dirty and tires get worn. You seek to wash it and replace the tires. So it is with your house and your body. If people abandoned their body every time it developed a defect that made it not function as it was designed to function, the suicide rate would be almost 100%. We do not abandon the body even though we get very critical of it. We seek to make it better and restore it to health. That is how Jesus deals with His body-the church. He seeks to restore it to health when it is sick. To be Christlike is to be ever seeking for ways to help the church be healthy. If you cannot stand an imperfect church, you are in the wrong world because that is all there is in this world. I love the way Eugene Peterson says it in his book *Reversed Thunder*.

"The churches if the Revelation show us that churches are not Victorian parlors where everything is always picked up and

ready for guests. They are messy family rooms. Entering a person's house unexpectedly, we are sometimes met with a barrage of apologies. St. John does not apologize. Things are out of order, to be sure, but that is what happens to churches that are lived in. They are not showrooms. They are living rooms, and if the person's living in them are sinners, there are going to be clothes scattered about, hand prints on the woodwork, and mud on the carpet. For as long as Jesus insists on calling sinners and not the righteous to repentance- and there is no indication as yet that he has changed His policy in that regard-churches are going to be an embarrassment to the fastidious and an affront to the upright. St. John sees them simply as lamp stands: They are places, locations, where the light of Christ is shown. They are not themselves the light. There is nothing particularly glamorous about churches, nor, on the other hand, is there anything particularly shameful about them. They simply are."

The body does a lot of things even when it is sick or defective. It is inadequate, but it still works and loves, and makes a difference in the world. So the defective church is still the church. It's light is often dim, but it still points people to the light of Christ. It has plenty of sin of its own, but it still leads people to find forgiveness of their sin. Christians are often more concerned about their crabgrass than a lost world. But the lost are still won by a world wide outreach.

At a church supper there may be more gossip than casseroles, yet people are loved and cared for, and they get support to survive one crisis after another. Christians may be more interested in the sports world yet the Word of God does get through, and there is a measure of growth in having the mind of Christ. Christians want to be in an atmosphere of the holy with little interest in being holy themselves. You can go on and on about the defects of Christians, and all of it is true, but none of which is a valid reason for forsaking the church. Jesus knew that the critics of the church would be correct. He is the first and the greatest critic of them all. But He also makes it clear that a critic whose goal is not to help the church overcome its defects does not have his mind toward the church.

Look at the shocking criticism He levels at the church of Ephesus. He has just said, I am impressed with your deeds, hard work, and perseverance. You have been orthodox in your theology, and have not grown weary in enduring hardships. Jesus really butters them up as being a great church. But then in verse 4 He says, "But there is this one thing I hold against you. You have forsaken your first love." He just as well have poked them in the eye with the golden lampstand, for this was a devastating accusation. What good is all the rest without love? Everything minus love equals nothing. If you lack the basic thing, what good is it that you have a lot of lesser things? Jesus admits this is the basic thing to have love, for He makes it clear if they do not repent and get restored to their first love, He will remove their lamp stand. In other words, they will cease to be His light in the world. A church without love is like a candle without a wick, a flashlight without a battery, a bulb without electricity. There can be no light where there is no love.

Here we see the bride and the groom when the honeymoon is over and the hot summer has changed to winter, and just when they are most needed, the coals of fire have grown cold. First love

is honeymoon love. It is the love that warms life and makes people happy to be alive. Jesus loves this kind of love too. The radiance of the real hot romance is everybody's favorite kind of light. Jesus is a jealous groom, and He wants His bride to keep that romance alive and not let it grow cold. It is of interest to note that the problem in our relationship to Christ is the same as our problem in relationship to our mates. We let the flame go out and try to live by the ashes of yesterday's fire. In our romantic and religious life we become cold and dull, and just follow a routine. Mates can often adjust to this and live together for 40 years after the fire is out. Jesus is not content with this sort of relationship. He expects to be loved today just as He was yesterday, and as He expects to be loved forever.

The fascinating thing here is Jesus says it is a matter of the will. You lose your love because of choices you make. You can choose to remake these choices and get back to your first love. Love is not just an emotion, love is a choice. Jesus says you can repent and stop doing what you are doing, and start doing again what you did at first. First love is a priority, and it is a choice you can make. People act like love is some outside force like a flying saucer, and unless one hits you you cannot do anything to make it happen. But love is not so, it is an inside job. It is what you choose to do with your life and energy. We choose to love or we choose not to. It is not an external that we have no control over. It is an internal we have full control over. Jesus says you forsook your first love. It was your choice. Now make another choice to get back to it, or you are no longer a part of my team, and you will be sidelined for good.

They had some good things going for them, but it was like a car that has run out of gas. It will keep going for quite a ways because of the momentum of past power. They were sort of coasting along not realizing they had run out of the fuel of love, and would soon come to a halt. Jesus says, get back to your fuel supply of love, or you will be going nowhere. It is interesting to note that he says in verse 6 that they still had their hate working. They hated evil and that was good, but their love had conked out. Hate of evil is easier to keep going than love for people and the Lord. You find Christians who are powerful haters of evil who have lost their love for the evil people they so hate.

Hate of evil is good Jesus said, but it cannot be the light that represents Him in the world. Their hate is going strong, but if they don't get back to their first love, they will be removed. No church can be moved by hate of evil alone and be what Christ needs in this world. Without love the best hater is of no ultimate value. Hate of evil by itself is worthless for the purpose of Christ. Hate only has value when it is a servant of love. Show me a Christian who is a great hater, but who is not a great lover, and I'll show you a Christian whose light is about to go out, for such a Christian cannot represent Christ in the world.

Augustine of Canterbury insisted that the 3,000 monks in Bangor Wales strive to evangelize the Saxons. "No way," said the Abbot, "We will not preach the faith to this cruel race...who have treacherously driven our ancestors from their country..." Augustine said, "Since you will not show them the way of life, I am sure they will show you the way of death." Not many years later Ethelfrid invaded Wales and many of these monks were massacred. They were excellent haters, and possibly even the best ever, but that did not prevent their light from being snuffed out. Hate does not shine, only love does. If love does not shine, hate will not save the day, for it can never be a substitute for love. There is no substitute for love.

The world needs saving more than it needs condemning. The truth is not God so hated the world that He planned to judge it, but He so loved the world He gave His only Son to save it. The Bible makes it clear that to God the priority is love.

6. RETURN TO FIRST LOVE Based on Rev. 2:1f

O Henry tells a short story of the lad who grew up in a small village and sat next to a lovely young lady so innocent and sweet. He left that village for the big city where he got in with the wrong crowd and became a thief and a pick pocket. One day as he was working the crowd, doing quite well, he saw that girl he sat by back in the village. She was still the same fresh, innocent, and sweet girl. He did not want to be seen by her, so he hid, but he was overwhelmed by his memory. He remembered what he had been, and realized what he had become. He leaned his head against the lamp post and said, "God, how I hate myself." That was his turning point. He had the choice to go back to what he once was, or to go on to be more what he was becoming, and that he hated.

The Prodigal Son came to this point and said, "I am going home where I was." That is what repentance is! It is responding to what you remember as a better day, and a better way, and choosing to stop departing from it, but to go back to what was. Repentance is admitting that you once were on a better path that you have now forsaken, and choosing to get back on that better path. We tend to think repentance is for those only who have never been saved, but Jesus makes it clear, repentance is as much for Christians as it is for those being saved for the first time. Christians need to constantly consider if they were once on a better road that they need to return to. They need to ask with William Cowper-

Where is the blessedness I knew,
When first I saw the Lord?
Where is the soul-refreshing view
Of Jesus and His Word?

Revival; renewal, and repentance: They are all the same experience of getting back to first love-to the love that puts Jesus in the center of life. This is not a rare need, but a constant need, because we, as Christians, tend to decline. The idea of perpetual growth does not fit reality. We are usually the best Christians we will ever be when we first fall in love with Jesus. Maybe we are not very sharp in our theology, and wouldn't know a false prophet if we heard one. Maybe we would not spot a heresy if it sat on our nose. But we had a fervent love for our Savior, and we long to make that love known. The best witness for Christ comes from new converts. They don't know how often people don't want to hear their good news, and so they share it with enthusiasm. It is only after a lot of rejection that a Christian tends to withdraw from the sharing of his or her faith. That is why Jesus says we need to become as little children to enter the kingdom of God. It is getting back to the simplicity and enthusiasm of our new birth days that is really the high point of our Christian life. To be childlike in Christ again with a fervent love is the ideal.

Jesus is not anti-maturity, for that is a vital part of the Christian life, but we need to keep going back to that first love and keep it alive as we grow in maturity, or the maturity itself is much ado

about nothing. When we first become Christians we are the most normal. We soon grow out of this normalcy and become abnormal. That is why we need revivals to get back to normal. Vance Havner said it as only he could in his book *Repent Or Else!*

"Revivals should not be necessary. God intended that His people Should grow in grace without periodic spells of backsliding and repenting. But so long as we have such a malarial brand of Christianity, a fever and a chill, a fever and a chill, we shall need revivals. Nor is a revival a mere emotional upheaval. The way out of a stupor is not by getting into a stew. God does not intend that we live in a fever of excitement all the time. The farmer must break up his fallow ground, but if he did only that he would never plant or cultivate or reap. Surgery may be necessary at times but it is not normal to live in a hospital. What we call revival is simply a return to normal New Testament Christianity. Most of us are so subnormal that if we ever became normal we would be considered abnormal!"

Older Christians acting like younger Christians would seem abnormal, but the fact is, that is what Jesus is looking for in His church. He wants mature Christians who still have the fire of their first love. Jesus does not grow cold in His love for His bride. He does not love His church less now than when He chose to lay down His life for her. He loves her fervently, and He wants that kind of love in return. The idea of love growing dim and fading is based on our weak human nature, and what we experience because we let love slide. Jesus says this is not only not necessary, it is stupid. Love is the best thing we have going for us in any relationship. To just let this decay and grow old and cold is as dumb as catsup on corn flakes. If you are not so dumb as to put catsup on corn flakes, why would you be so dumb as to let love grow cold?

It is stupid, but we do it all the time. We do it with marriage; friends, and with the Lord. We let the most valuable and treasured possessions we can ever have rust away for lack of use, and all because we foolishly buy into the lie that it is normal for love to fade and decay. Jesus says it is not so. First love is capable of being kept alive permanently. You don't have to decline to second love, or third love, and down to a level where love is in the pits. First love can be last love as well. The ideal Christian life is one where the old saints love the Lord just as much as they did the first year of their Christian life. That is what Jesus expects, and not a love that declines so that He ends up far down on the list of priorities.

Jesus is not interested in being one of your possessions you just had to have, and then after the novelty wore off, got stuck in the garage or attic where it sits neglected because your love has found other objects to entice it. He expects to be on a first love basis with His bride, or she will be set aside. This is exactly what God expected from His people in the Old Testament, and why many of them were set aside, and only a remnant being used to fulfill His plan. In Jer. 2:2 God says, "Go and shout this in Jerusalem's streets: The Lord says, I remember how eager you were to please me as a young bride long ago and how you loved me and followed me even through the barren deserts." God remembered those good old days, but they did not. They took after other gods and lost their first love, and God had to send them away into exile.

The number one cause for all failure in life is the forsaking of first love. People fall in love and life is grand, but they don't stay there, or come back to that love when they drift away. They just keep on going and their love dies. They fall in love with God and the Lord Jesus, but then they get

all tied up with many other things, and their love for Jesus is pushed to the back burner. The world is full of use-to-be Christians. They have now found other loves, and have lost their first love. The strange thing is that they are not necessarily no longer part of the church. These Ephesians were still going strong in the church, and they had all kinds of qualities, but they had forsaken their first love. Good Christian people who seemed to be busy as can be in church work can still be a victim of this dread disease of loss of first love.

Love never fails, but lack of love sure does. In fact, lack of love is sure to fail, and this can happen to the best of Christians. Here is a good orthodox church. They were zealous and hard working, and ready to endure hardship for Christ, but they were about to be set on the shelf because of their loss of first love motivation. They do not lose their salvation, but they lose the chance to be used, because without love a church is just not a useable channel for Christ.

How in the world can this be? We can assume it is a fairly common problem, for it is the first problem Jesus deals with, and it has the most severe threat of any of the problems. The removable of the lamp stand is the most radical warning Jesus gives to the seven churches. We can assume that over the centuries Jesus has closed up shop in many churches because they forsook their first love. How does it happen? Most see the issue here to be one of competition where good things become so dominant they choke out the best. We are deceived if we think that it is only evil we need to be aware of as an enemy. The good can be the worst enemy of the best. Many Christians lose their effectiveness for Christ by pursuing good things at the expense of the best. The best is love for Christ on the level of first love intensity. There is no value more pleasing to Christ, and more useful for both the church and the world.

The good, in the case of the Ephesians, seems to be their pre-occupation with orthodoxy. They have tested those who claim to be Apostles and have found them false. They have also been very intolerant of wicked men, and they hate the practices of the Nicolaitans. They are doctrinally and morally sound, and this is a good thing to be. But apparently they have let these good things rob them of the best, for they have in their diligent pursuit of doctrinal and moral purity let their first love decay. They now have more enthusiasm for being doctrinally correct than they do for loving Christ and those He died to save.

What are they suppose to do? Are they to let a few heretics in once in awhile, and tolerate a little immorality in the church? Of course not! That is not what Jesus is seeking. He commends them for the good goals they have reached. It is just that they have paid too high a price to reach them. You can stay doctrinally correct and morally pure without becoming so fanatical that you forget your calling is to love God with all your being and your neighbor as yourself. It is life's easiest mistake to make, and that is why we are all guilty of making it. We let the good rob us of the best.

G. Campbell Morgan, the prince of expositors, told of a friend of his who loved to spend time with his daughter. They just enjoyed each others company, and then suddenly she was too busy for him, and always made excuses to avoid their usual walks. He was puzzled and grieved, but said nothing. Then came his birthday, and she gave him an exquisitely worked pair of slippers. "Darling," he said, "It was so good of you to buy me these." She said, "Oh, father, I didn't buy them, I made them for you." He said, "Is this why you have been so busy the last three months?" "Yes," she replied. He said, "My darling, I like these slippers very much, but next time buy the slippers and walk with me. I would rather have my child than anything she can make for me." She had robbed

him of the best for the sake of the good. If you think only bad stuff is the enemy, you will be easily deceived. It is usually something good that is the enemy of the best.

Every neglected child and mate is usually neglected for something good, and every Christian who forsakes his first love usually does so for the pursuit of what is good, true, and beautiful. But it is not the best and what the Savior most desires. The poet David G. Ganton wrote:

O church of Christ,
Of native love bereft,
Come back again
To that first love you left.

Your prudent works
You have not failed to do,
But you have left
The love which once you knew.

Your purity,
And zeal for truth and right,
Your patient care
Are worthy in His sight.

But all is vain
Unless impelled by love,
Thrice-pledged, to Him
Who lives and reigns above.

Repent, Oh church,
And seek again to know
That first constraining love
Of long ago.

Knowing how to hate evil is good, but it is not the best. Knowing how to spot a phony apostle is good, but it is not the best. Hard work and perseverance is good, but it is not the best. Enduring hardships for Christ is good, but it is not the best. There is only one best, and that is first love, and without that all the good in the world will not make you qualified to represent the Christ who revealed just how much God is love. Christian zeal can lead to the same things as happens to the workaholic. The father and husband goes off to work to provide for family. It is the labor of love, but soon he is in love with his labor, and before long he is neglecting the family he is laboring to provide for, and he can get so obsessed with his job that he even loses that family for which he went off to work. It can happen to the Christian. He or she can get so into Christian work that they begin to neglect Bible study and prayer, and even church attention. They are working like the devil for the Lord, and they do not realize they are serving the devil rather than the Lord because they have let their love for Christ grow cold.

How would you like it if you worked on your master piece for 35 years and then showed it to the queen, and she said, "It is awful, amusing, and it is artificial." Well, that is exactly what happened

to the great architect Sir Christopher Wren. After he labored 35 years to rebuild St. Paul's Cathedral in London, after the great fire of 1666, he escorted her majesty Queen Anne through his life's work and waited breathlessly for her response. And, believe it or not, he was pleased when she said it is awful, amusing, and artificial. Had the years of labor relieved him of his senses? Not at all! This was back in 1710 when these words still had their original meaning. Awful meant awe-inspiring. Amusing meant amazing. Artificial meant artistic. She was complimenting him.

That is what John Claypool was doing too when he said, "God is an amateur. People were shocked and felt it was a putdown, but they were reading into the word amateur something that was not there in its original meaning. Amateur goes back to the Latin root *amare* which means to love, and originally it referred to a person who did something for the love of it. They did not sign a contract and get big bucks. They did not have a court order forcing them to do it. They did what they did because they loved to do it. They did it freely and for free out of love of the sport or whatever.

God was not forced to create the universe. God was not paid to provide a Savior for the human race. He was not coerced by a greater power to send His Son into the world. Why did He do it then? It was because He wanted to. It is because He loved to do it. God does everything, not because He has to, but because He wants to. Nobody pays Him for anything. He is an amateur who does all He does because He loves to do it. The Gospel is not, God felt so obligated; God felt so duty bound; God felt so pressured, but rather, God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son. He did it out of love. That is what God wants in return from His children. He does not want slaves who feel bound to obey. He does not want pros who only do His will for a price. He wants amateurs who will do it because they love it, and it is their pleasure and joy.

When the Christian loses this amateur status and goes pro, he has forsaken his first love, for first love is amateur love. It is love that says, "I serve Christ and His church because I want to. I read the Bible because I want to. I pray and strive to witness for Christ because I want to. I do all a Christian should do because I love to do it." That is what an amateur is: One who does what he does for the love of it. But that can change, and the amateur Christians can soon be saying, "I have to go to church tonight. I have to study my lesson for tomorrow. I have to write out a check for the church. All of the sudden the Christian life is not lived for the love of it, but out of duty and obligation. The Christian slips back under law and now is a pro under contract with God. Everything is now part of a deal. I'll do this for God if He will do that for me. Such a Christian can do work for the kingdom of God, but as Jesus makes clear, if that is the kind of Christian he wanted, he never would have bothered to replace the legalistic system with the grace of the New Testament.

God had all the pros He could endure in the Scribes and Pharisees. He wanted amateurs who would live for Him and obey Him just for the love of it. Lose that amateur status and you are facing being taken off the team, for he who does not serve Christ for the love of it will not be a witness to the grace of God. He will more likely convey to the world that God is law, and not that God is love. When a candle begins to give off more black smoke than light, it is time to remove it. So Jesus says that He will remove that church which does not get back to being amateur for Christ.

The problem with hating evil is that we get so good at it that we don't even need the Lord. We can forsake our love for Him and forget His goal was to seek and save the lost, and get so wrapped up in fighting some evil cause that we totally forget why we are even here as the church. It is one of the of the high risks of Christians getting involved in any attack on evil. Jesus did not say don't do it,

but He said to these Ephesians that it is in their favor that they do hate the Nicolaitans. But the fact is, they were pre-occupied with their hate and had forsaken their love. The end result is they lost their battle with hate also for they would be removed from the battle.

The bottom line for the church is never what are you against, but what or who are you for? A church that does not love is a failure no matter how much evil it hates. Though I hate all the heresy of our day, and though I despise the false cults and abhor the immorality of the culture, if I have not love, I am nothing: nothing that matters in the long run, for hating evil does not have the power to save anyone. God will judge all evil, and your hatred of it will add nothing to that judgement. Only love can save and make an ultimate difference.

Every Christian need to examine their emotions in the light of Christ's words here. Is my hate a flame that burns brightly where all can see while my love is a burnt out lamp? If hate is ever brighter than love, you have forsaken your first love. Love should always be conspicuous over hate. It is love that covers a multitude of sins. First love forgives and labors to keep the path smooth. Only when it fades does the flame of hate take precedence, and then one becomes very critical and no longer forgiving. The negatives of life form a team and life revolves around the negatives. This is why marriages fail. This is why churches fail, and this is why Christians become a pain in the world rather than a power to make a difference.

What is the answer to all the lack of love that spoils marriages and the ministry of the church? Jesus says the solution starts with remembering the height from which you have fallen. You remember what was; you repent for what now is, and you return to what ought to be. Here are the three R's for all renewal: Remember, repent, and return. These are three things all people can chose to do. You don't need any magic formula or religious ritual, you just do it. You start with remembering. Remember when your love for Christ was sacrificial and not superficial. You were willing go out of your way to serve Him. You would go the second mile. You were glad to be a servant of Christ.

Remember the good old days when He was the central motivating love of your life. When you remember this, you will recognize that you have let Him, who was the center, slip out to the edge of your life. Jesus will not tolerate being just one of many commitments. He expects to be number one on any list. Remember what is once was and get back there. This is a dear John letter in reverse. He is not saying, "Dear Ephesus I have left you, but, dear Ephesus you have left me. Get back to your first love, or I will leave you."

Jesus expects commitment to be taken seriously. Jesus is saying to His bride, "I miss the honeymoon where you were so devoted to me." The Lord is longing for that first love. This church is apparently so busy fighting evil they have little time for loving and worship. Maybe that is why the book of Revelation is so full of the scenes of worship in heaven. Jesus does not get much on earth, and He reveals to His bride how the angels of heaven adore Him, and they were not even redeemed by His blood. How much more ought Christians to adore the Lord who bought them by His sacrifice? Jesus not only longs for the love of His bride, He demands that they remember and return to their first love.

7. RICH IN POVERTY Based on Rev. 2:8-11

One of the great paradoxes of life is the fact that the poor can be richer than the rich. Poverty is no necessary hindrance to being wealthy. Wealth, on the other hand, is no guarantee of being truly rich. Even rich Christians are often not rich just because they have wealth. Charles Schultz, the richest cartoonist in history, with his comic strip Peanuts has terrible limitations in spite of his wealth of many millions. He can afford to go anywhere anytime, but he has a form of agoraphobia that makes him fear to go places. The very thought of walking through a hotel lobby makes him sweat with fear. He has his own jet, but he avoids travel and spends a lot of time just being depressed. All his millions do not make him happier.

He is in a sort of perpetual state of grief, but it is called good grief, for out of his sadness he is able to produce laughter, for he can see the funny side of failure, which he is constantly depicting in the life of Charlie Brown who fails in romance, sports, flying kites, and life in general. Losing is funny when it is happening to Charlie Brown and not to us. This laughter at life's misfortunes has made Schultz a fortune, and he is good at portraying it because he lives it.

When he portrays Lucy saying to Charlie Brown, "Don't let you team down by showing up," he is expressing what he experienced in his own childhood. His father's barbershop was where O'gara's is now on Snelling Ave. in St. Paul, MN, and he writes of his experience there as a child. "I remember when I use to go into my father's barbershop for a hair cut. If a paying customer came in while I was in the chair, I'd have to step down and wait for my father to cut his hair. There I would sit, with half a hair cut, feeling ridiculous." We could go on and on about his feelings of rejection and failure which he cannot escape even as one of the richest people in the world.

The point his life illustrates is one of the major points of the Risen Lord to his churches. Poverty and wealth are very relative terms, and people with riches can be poor, and people with little wealth can be rich. It works both ways for Christians also, for Jesus says to the church of Laodicea in 3:17, "You say, I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing. But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor blind and naked." There are rich Christians who live in utter poverty says Jesus. But to the church in Smyrna He says, "I know your afflictions and your poverty-yet you are rich!" So you have in the judgment of Jesus your poor Christians who are rich, and your rich Christians who are poor.

In other words, Jesus had a different standard of values than the world. Christians are pretty much a product of their culture, and most cultures judge riches by material possessions. The church with the biggest buildings and most land, and where the parking lot is filled with the most expensive cars is the rich church. It would be folly to assume that every church like that is in reality poor in their spiritual wealth, but it is equally folly to ignore Jesus and assume that sort of wealth makes a church spiritually rich. It is also jumping to conclusions to assume that the poor struggling church is a gold mine of spiritual wealth. The only thing we can know for sure is the value of any church to Christ is not one that can be determined by its net worth in dollars.

Jesus is saying that richness is more a matter of attitude than accumulation. He is not saying accumulation is evil, but He is saying it is meaningless without the proper attitude. If you have a wrong spirit that is not pleasing to Him, you can have gold plated pews and diamonds studded

hymnals, and you will still be poor to Him. On the other hand, you can have wood pews and hand me down hymnals and be rich if your attitude is one that pleases the Lord of the church. Jesus just loved this church of Smyrna. He had not a critical word for them which he had for the others. It was a suffering church; a persecuted church; a church where loyalty to Christ could very well mean death.

Jesus loved it, but American Christians hate this kind of church. Vance Havner wrote, "It is not easy to preach on Smyrna nowadays. The average American congregation is in no mood to appreciate such a church. It is a day of quick prosperity and give-away shows, it is not easy to interest a well-fed, well-clothed, well-housed Sunday morning crowd in the Smyrna brand of loyalty. We are more like Laodicea, rich and increased with goods and needing nothing. It does not cost much to be a Christian now.

We do not have to pretend we would love to be a part of a suffering church. But we do have to quit pretending that peace and prosperity is an environment which makes us better Christians. The whole health and wealth Gospel, so popular in America, is a mockery of Christ and this church He so loved. Any teaching that says you are spiritually blessed of God and superior because you have abundance of things, peace, and prosperity, is a rejection of the words of Christ. This church that He favored was poor. The word is actually beggary. They had no luxuries and not even all the necessities. They were not popular in their culture. They were despised and hated and persecuted. Yet they were a successful church, and Jesus says they were rich, because in spite of all they suffered they were faithful to Him.

Sometimes that is all a Christian or a church can do-be faithful to Christ. They could not win the masses, and they could not build a big church there to the glory of Christ. They could not even necessarily survive, for some would not. All they could do was be faithful through it all, and yet Jesus calls them rich. This was a successful church in His eyes, but to most culture enslaved Christians this was a total flop of a church. We need to learn from this evaluation of Christ that it is not very wise for us to judge the value of churches. How can we know that the big wealthy church is nauseating to Christ, or that the little country church is a precious diamond to Him? We can't know how Jesus feels about any church. All we can do is make sure we are, as members of the church, making it a body that is rich in His eyes, because no matter what the circumstances we are faithful and loyal to Him.

Jesus loved this church and called them rich because they were willing to pay the cost of being faithful to Him even to the point of death. You have got to be rich in faith to cover that kind of costly loyalty. None of the churches suffered like Smyrna. Jesus says they are to suffer and the devil will put them through terrible times of persecution, and some will even die. Why? Are they bad kids deserving of such painful discipline? Are they being judged for their failure? Not at all! This was one of the best of all the churches, and yet they suffered unjustly. Jesus does not promise escape or even protection. He only promises the reward of the crown of life and the assurance that they will never suffer again, and not be hit by the second death which will be the lot of those who make them suffer in time. There will be reward and judgment, and they will come out winners, but there is no offer of escape.

The message of Job is taught again. Bite your tongue if you feel the impulse to judge suffering churches like Job's friends judged him. It is easy to jump to the conclusion that churches that get

burned out or blown down by storms, or which get persecuted are under the judgment of God. Not so says Jesus, for the suffering church may in fact be one of His favorites instead of a rebel being punished. There are a lot of mysteries in the realm of suffering, and one of them is why the best and most favored, who least deserve suffering, often suffer the most.

This does not fit well with the American perspective. We do not suffer like the churches in other parts of the world. Therefore, we feel we are the best and the most blessed. I cannot escape this conclusion in my thinking, and I am grateful to be a part of the church in this land of liberty and freedom from persecution. Nevertheless, I have to see that from the perspective of Jesus the church in those lands where they have suffered for their faith may in fact be the best and richest churches in the world. I would not want to move out of Laodicea and move over to Smyrna and endure their suffering. I love being in a suffering free church, but I ought not to let that deceive me into thinking that it is the best church, and most loved church. The point is, let's try and see the church from the point of view of Jesus and not our own. We think because we don't suffer for Christ we are the most blessed, but this may not be true from Christ's point of view. It is not their suffering that makes them the best, but their faithfulness in suffering, and faithfulness is an issue we need to consider.

FAITHFULNESS.

Christians tend to be strong in the areas that are a strong part of their culture and upbringing. The people of Smyrna were noted for being faithful to their commitments. More than all of the other cities they were loyal to Rome. They never wavered in their fidelity. Cicero called Smyrna, "One of our most faithful and most ancient allies." They were so patriotic that when the Roman soldiers were losing a battle in the far East the people of Smyrna stripped off their own clothes to send them to the Romans who were cold and suffering. Smyrna was the first city in the world to erect a temple to the goddess Roma, and to the spirit of Rome in 195 B.C. In 26 A.D. it was chosen over Ephesus and all the other cities of Asia Minor to be the place of erecting a temple to Tiberius. Rome honored her for her faithfulness. The point of all this is that Christians are influenced by their culture. A Christian takes on the virtues that are popular in his secular environment. A Christian who grew up as a non-Christian in a good solid home where mom and dad loved and were faithful to each other is more likely to be a faithful mate than one who grew up with an environment full of infidelity, lies, and deceit.

The Christians of Smyrna were faithful whatever the cost because that was a strong virtue in their lives even as non-Christians. The non-Christian culture is not irrelevant to Christ and His church. Those cultures where there are godly virtues are far more conducive to building strong Christians than those where ungodliness is the chosen life-style. There are Christians who can say, thank God for the strengths of my non-Christian heritage. Others cannot say that, for theirs was mostly bad. Christians in Smyrna could be grateful, for without that heritage they may not have been able to be faithful to Christ under the pressure they had to endure. Some of these Christians will be crowned and reign with Christ because of the teaching and training they got from their pagan teachers. If you think all that is non-Christian culture is worthless or evil, you are rejecting the Biblical truth that God is working in all cultures to prepare the way for the Gospel. In Him we live and move and have our being is what Paul said to the pagans on Mars Hill. It is Christian pride that refuses to accept the reality of virtues that can be taught and caught in non-Christian cultures.

Jesus is deeply impressed with these Christians who can be faithful when it was so costly.

Anyone can be faithful when it is an honor to be a Christian, but when one is hated and persecuted it takes a special commitment to be faithful. Not all Christians have what it takes to be faithful in hard times. They fall away and cease to take a stand for Christ when the cost gets too high. All of the disciples fled when Jesus was arrested. Peter was particularly brave, but under pressure he folded and denied his Lord. Paul had the same experience and lost disciples right and left when the going got hard. When the going gets tough the faithless got going in the other direction. Paul complained in IITim., "Demas has forsaken me having loved this present world." He became faithless and forsook Paul, as did others. Paul was often alone for nobody would stand with him and pay the cost of imprisonment. Even John Mark, the author of the Gospel of Mark, bailed out of following Paul when the going got rough.

Faithfulness is a virtue so pleasing to Christ, and it is a key to any lasting relationship. There is a direct correlation between the weakness of Christian commitment and the breakdown in marriage in our culture. People who cannot be faithful when faithfulness is costly will not be able to keep any relationship going very long. It is the nature of all relationships to face testing and only the faithful will be able to survive the test. I love the radical way Shakespeare has a faithful wife express her strong desire to above all else be faithful.

"Chain me with roaring bears;
Or shut me nightly in a charnel house,
O'er covered quite with dead men's rattling bones,
With Reeky Shrouds with yellow chapless skulls;
Or bid me go into a new-maid grave,
And hide me with a dead man in his shroud,
Things that, to hear them told, has made me tremble.
And I will do it without fear or doubt,
To live an unstained wife of my sweet love."

That is the kind of faithfulness Jesus is looking for in His bride-the church: A faithfulness that will keep her steady and loyal to Him, even when it is not pleasant, but very painful to be so. It does not take much character to be faithful when all is well and life is full of joy and pleasure. But when the pain and suffering come in any relationship, that will be the test of true faithfulness. Is it a mere cobweb easily broken by pressure, or is it a steel cord that will not break regardless of the strain? We do not face martyrdom, or even persecution in our day, but the fact is, this is still a key virtue for us, for no church and no Christian can be pleasing to Christ without faithfulness. Shannon said, "One faithful, loyal soul is of more value to a church, to a business, to a home, than a dozen rapid starters-and starters."

Be faithful even to the point of death said Jesus, and I will give you the crown of life. It is no good to be 90% faithful, for if you are not 100% faithful you will stop short and miss the crown. You have to be faithful all the way. The idea that you can be a faithful husband if you only have one affair is nonsense. It is not faithfulness if you are not one hundred percent. You cannot be a little bit unfaithful and still be faithful. I heard a crazy story many years ago about a dog that got his tail cut off by a lawn mower. The dog's owner buried the tail in the back yard, but a few hours later the dog was scratching at the door, and he had his tail in his mouth. He had dug it up and brought it to the house. The owner dug a deeper hole, but some hours later the dog was again at the door with his tail. The owner was deeply impressed for he realized he had a dog that was faithful to the end.

It is a silly tale, but it is the message of Christ to His church. He longs for a church where Christians are faithful to the end. He wants to see Christians whose lives show what their lips say when they utter the words you are Lord. Is it any wonder that the church fails to do the will of Christ in the world when Christians are unfaithful. They let their love grow cold; they let heresy and immorality into the church; they sleep while the world perishes and are indifferent-neither hot nor cold.

These are the problems Jesus had with the first century church, and He still has them with the church of today. The greatest need of Christ in any age is faithful Christians. They are the key to a church being pleasing to Christ.

In every church, in every climb,
When there's some work to do,
It very likely will be done
By just the faithful few.

Dean Stanley said, "Give me a man or woman, young or old, high or low, on whom we know we can thoroughly depend, who will stand firm when others fail-in such a one there is a fragment of the Rock of Ages." John Knox was just such a man. He heard the Reformation message of justification by faith, and he put his faith in Christ, and refused to surrender that faith even when he was forced out of his professorship at the University of Rome. Even when he was sentenced to exile. Even when he was forced to galleys, and for 18 months was chained to the oars. He was offered a bishopric if he would compromise, but he refused. He went to Scotland and became a leader of the church there, but then came persecution, and he had to renounce his faith or die. In 1572 he was faithful even unto death. His people were strengthened by his faithfulness, and though they had to meet in the mountains they never missed a service. Many were caught and killed, but they did not cancel the service. Many were sent as slaves to the West Indies, and before it was over 28,000 Scottish Christians died for their faith.

There preacher silenced and deposed;
The house of prayer against them closed.
They on the mountain heath reposed,
But though in great perplexity.

There harps were not on willows hung,
But still in tune and ready strong,
Till mountain echoes round them rung,
To songs of joyful melody.

Though from their friends and home exiled,
Love wanderers in the desert wild,
The wilderness around them smiled,
For heaven approved their faithfulness.
Author unknown

William of Orange came to their rescue and Scottish Christians have been free every since the 18th century began. Christians there have never had to face that same test, just as we do not in America. So the fact is, most Christians in history do not have to be faithful unto death. It has been

a minority, but it is foolish to think that this makes faithfulness any less necessary for those who live in lands of peace and freedom where it costs nearly nothing to be a Christian. The majority of Christians have the harder test of being faithful when it is so easy to be unfaithful, and put the will of Christ as second, third, or tenth place in their list of priorities.

It is one of the paradoxes of history that this small church which was hated and persecuted is the one church out of the seven that survived. The others had so much more going for them in terms of wealth, acceptance, and more people. But this church alone survived and has been the scene of active missions in the 20th century. Jesus, by His providence in history, is saying that the one virtue that He treasures over all others is faithfulness. He will be faithful to those who are faithful to Him.

8. THE CAPITAL OF HELL Based on Rev. 2:12-17

Is there any truth to the popular idea that hell is right here on earth? There were a lot of Minnesotans who believed it in Jan. of 1873. The morning of the 8th was beautiful and the snow was melting. Masses of people made plans to travel, visit, and shop. But about 4 in the afternoon the wind came blowing in, the temperature dropped 40 degrees in one minute, and the worst blizzard in Minnesota history had begun, and it wouldn't stop for 3 days. Hurricane winds driving the snow forced all living things to find shelter or perish.

A youth in school in New Ulm only had to cross the road to his house, but his body was later found 8 miles away. Some buried themselves in snow drifts and survived. William Trier and his bride and father were returning home to Fergus Falls. The men got out of the sleigh to look for shelter and perished. The bride stayed in the sleigh and lived. A St. Peter woman was just out feeding her chickens and died trying to find her door step. Many died within feet of their own houses because they could not find them in the blinding blizzard. Thousands of people narrowly escaped death, but 70 people actually died in this hellish storm. If you took a pole then, the hell on earth would have won by a landslide. People always tend to associate the hell on earth idea with terrible suffering and hardship. This is legitimate, for that is what we see in the church at Pergamum. They were having tough times, and at least one by the name of Antipas had died for his faith.

I want to call your attention to the fact that Jesus says in verse 13 that the throne of Satan was in that city. He ends the verse by saying Satan lives there. So here is the city where Satan lives, and where he has his throne. This is none other than the capital of hell. If the devil has his home and his office there, he does not commute from hell to do his dirty work. He can do it all right there in Pergamum. So there is truth then to the idea that hell is right here on earth. Now this does not sound like the best place to start a church. This is like trying to start a Sunday School class for the hell's angels. But Jesus started His church there, and the Christians were remaining true to His name. They were not renouncing their faith even though the pressure was on.

Why would Pergamum be any more the capital of hell than any of the other cities? It had been a capital city for almost 400 years. Pliny, the ancient, called it, "The most famous city in Asia." Sir William Ramsay, the modern traveler and scholar wrote, "Beyond all other cities in Asia Minor, it

gives the traveler the impression of a royal city, the home of authority." There were a number of reasons that Pergamum was the capital of hell. It was the center of Caesar worship. In 29 A. D. a temple to the godhead of Caesar was erected there. People had to call Caesar Lord or risk death by the sword. The Roman governor had the power to kill anyone on the spot with his sword if they did not conform to the law of Rome. That is why Jesus starts this letter by reminding them that He has the sharp two edged sword, and He will have the final word on who lives or dies. Hell's headquarters has some tough swordmen, but their swords will be no match for the sword of the Savior.

Satan knows that power corrupts, and that is why Pergamum is his capital. It was the capital of the seleucid kingdom back in 282 B.C., and it had remained a capital for nearly 4 centuries. Where there is power to rule and make policy, and establish values, you can count on it, Satan will be present. The implication is clear. Any capital where the forces of power operate is a capital of hell, for that is where Satan can get most of his agenda accomplished the quickest. Satan can get more evil done through those in high places than he can by means of the poor sinner who has no power. But get evil into the laws that govern a nation, and then you have a real impact for the goals of hell. Satan is no political dunce. He knows where to set up his office.

Not only does he know the best place for getting his agenda done is where the power is, but he knows the best place is where the education is. Pergamum was famous for its 200,000 volume library. It was second only to the largest in the world in Alexandria, Egypt. The king of Pergamum bribed the librarian of Alexandria to leave there and come to Pergamum. He did and this enraged the king of Egypt when he lost his outstanding scholar Aristophanes. He put embargo on the export of papyrus to Pergamum. If they had no paper, they could not have books. But the scholars of Pergamum invented parchment made of skin, and this was better and more lasting for books, and it made papyrus obsolete.

Pergamum became a center for learning and culture, and that too is why Satan made it hell's headquarters. It was the center of the latest fashions also. You can get a lot more evil done with educated sinners. Educated sinners can foul up whole nations and lead them astray. Power and brains together can cook up schemes that the devil can really delight in. The brilliant and powerful Nazi party was filled with educated and cultured people. They did more evil than millions of poorly educated sinners could ever do. Show me a center of power and learning and I will show you a capital of hell.

Pergamum was also the center of religious worship with temples to Zeus, Aphrodite and Aesculapius, the god of medicine. Jupiter was supposedly born in Pergamum. So if you add up power, education, and religious worship, you see why this was the capital of hell. Politics, education, and religion are three of the most powerful tools in the world for evil. This is why the church was there also, for these are three of the most powerful tools for good and the achieving of the will of God. It was not just the capital of hell, it was heaven's headquarters as well. Just because the devil uses something for his cause does not make it an evil tool. Jesus can and does use it as well, and the church is to be as wise as that old serpent the devil, and use power, learning and the religious nature of man for the glory of God. The church and hell are in the same town because they are competing for the same tools to be used for the cause of good or evil.

Jesus did not say to the church of Pergamum, "I am sorry I didn't realize I set you up in the

capital of hell. It's no place for a nice girl like you. I'll relocate you in a better setting where you won't have to contend with the devil." Jesus did not pull out for a better location. He said stay there, keep up the fight, and be overcomers. The church is not to run from evil, but stand fast and try to take that territory for the kingdom of God. It is sword against sword-the Sword of the Spirit against the sword of Satan. The Christian with the sword of the Spirit has the power of life and death. It is this sword of the Word that Jesus used when He faced Satan head to head in the wilderness, and it is the sword by which the church still conquers and overcomes the temptations of Satan. How do you fight evil power in government, education, and religion? There is only one Christian weapon, and that is the sword of the Word. It can succeed even in the capital of hell.

They were like Daniel in the lion's den with Satan going about like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour, but his mouth can still be shut by the power of the Word. He can be overcome even in his home court and capital city. The gates of hell will not prevail against the church said Jesus, but by the use of the Word of God as the churches battering ram they can even penetrate his capital and claim it for the kingdom of Christ. The church does not reject political power, learning, and religion, but rather, he links all of these tools to the Word of God and invades the capital of hell and turns it into a capital of heaven. Don't give up any tool just because the devil uses it. Use it for his defeat and be an overcomer of evil by the use of that same tool.

The problem with the Christians in Pergamum is they were themselves falling for some of Satan's clever tricks. In the Old Testament they were represented by Sodom, and in the New Testament by the Nicolaitans. It was a single teaching that seduced God's people in both Testaments. They taught that God's people should use the same tools as the world does. The difference is, they taught they should use them the same way as the world does, and not according to God's Word. They said religion is good and so go along with the religions of the world. They said sex is good and so go along with the sexual practices of the world. A little idolatry and a little immorality will help you fit into the culture and be accepted. This sounded good to many Christians who felt being Christian in a pagan culture put to many limits on life. Sex with temple prostitutes was popular and God's people reasoned that there was no harm in a little recreational sex. Nobody gets hurt and it makes you more hip and acceptable to your pagan neighbors.

If you are 90% Christian and only 10% pagan, that should be good enough they thought. This kind of thinking ensnares Christians all through history, and does so today. All of us are in some sort of battle to overcome this subtle satanic logic that makes us part time servants of his kingdom. Popular sins in any culture are always somewhat popular even with Christians. The problem is not that power, money, sex, or any other tool of Satan is in itself evil, but he entices men to use them in evil ways. All of these tools can be used in a way consistent with the word and plan of God.

The big danger of the Christians in Pergamum was self-centeredness. It is one of Satan's best weapons. Get Christians to so enjoy the pleasures of life that they not only become like the world in sensuality, but they forget the cross completely and its meaning for life. Jesus, who had infinite joy and pleasure for all eternity, gave it up and entered a world of suffering to endure the cross, and all that Satan can throw at Him. He experience hell on earth because He did not grasp at equality with the Father, and His right to escape all pain and suffering as the perfect Son of God.

To be Christlike means to give up our right to be equal to the world in self-centeredness and self-indulgence, and be willing to suffer, at least to some degree, for the benefit of others, and to take

up the cross and follow Jesus denying self for the benefit of others. This is hard even for Christians because we are conditioned by our culture to focus on self. Jesus does not like it when His people are unwilling to suffer, but only striving to get pleasure. This lust for pleasure leads Christians to fall for Satan's snares and become so worldly they no longer know how to bare the cross. It just does not fit their life-style. It was a problem in the early church and it is a problem today.

None of us are free from this defect, and the call to be overcomers is one we need to heed and work at or risk loss of great reward. Crossless Christians are suckers for the schemes that are concocted in the headquarters of hell. The more we can take up the cross and follow Jesus the more we can add the light of heaven in that hellish darkness. Jesus commended the Christians in Pergamum, for many were being faithful in that hell hole, and Antipas even died for his faith. Why should a good and godly man have to die? Why is the world full of unjust suffering and the innocent dying because of the folly of man?

E. Stanley Jones tells of the soldier who asked the chaplain to pray for him to get back safely as he went out on a dangerous mission. The chaplain said, "No I won't do that, but I will go with you." That is the answer of God to man's cry-why?

I won't guarantee you safety in this battle with the capital of hell, but I'll go with you. Jesus endured the worst that hell could design for the totally innocent. Jesus came into the capital of hell and suffered its worse to set up the kingdom of God in that very place. And He calls his church to fight the forces of evil and help rescue others from the schemes of Satan. We are to take the risk and pay the price, and be willing to suffer so that others might discover that hell on earth can become heaven on earth by finding Jesus as their Savior.

We began this message with how horrible weather convinces people there is hell on earth. We want to end with an equally strong illustration of how bad weather is a sign of the kingdom of God on earth. It was Christmas night in 1776. George Washington faced a crisis. Most of his army had not reenlisted and they were due to go home at the end of the year just a week away. The morale was as low as it had ever been. There was lack of ammunition and division among the generals. The fight for independence seemed to be going down the drain. Washington needed a victory or all was lost.

He reasoned that the Hessian guards would likely have been drinking heavily on Christmas, and so he decided to attack in the pre-dawn hours of Dec. 26. Just as he did, the most violent snow storm came up reducing the visibility to zero. It was just what Washington needed. In a 45 minute battle in that storm he took nearly a thousand prisoners while losing only two of his own men with three who were wounded. This startling victory changed the whole war. The moral was sky high, and volunteers came pouring in, and the war was pursued. The British were saying it was hell on earth, but the Americans in gratitude for that same storm were saying, it is heaven on earth. They were both right, for wherever you find the capital of hell, there you will also find the capital of heaven.

These letters to the churches make it clear that sometimes the forces of evil are clever enough to overcome those who are supposed to be the forces for good. Many Christians fall for the propaganda coming out of the devil's headquarters, and they are not just neutralized but actually become a tool of the kingdom of darkness. These letters are orders from the heavenly Pentagon from our Commander in Chief to do an about face, and stop marching to the drum of the enemy, and

become again a soldier of the kingdom of light.

Jesus knows that some Christians live in places that are harder than others, and the pressure to conform is greater. He knows what a clever opponent Satan is, and why Christians are deceived.

They are no less responsible, however, because of it.

In any warfare some soldiers have the worst of it and have to confront the enemy at his strong point. Others get to face the enemy at his weak point. Their task is the same, and that is to be faithful and be overcomers whatever the foe throws at them.

We each need to commit ourselves to fight for the victory of Christ even in the capital of hell.

9. THE ROAD OF REPENTANCE. Based on Rev. 2:18-29

For decades the American people have been lulled into complacency by hearing the Gallop Pole say that over 90% of Americans believe in God. This led to a false security that we were a godly nation. But now Gallop decided to get more specific, and he discovered that only 10% of Americans are really committed Christians who take Jesus seriously, pray, and live the Christian life. The vast majority of Christians in America are indistinguishable from the non-Christians in their life-style and values.

The church has contributed to this by a non-virtuous toleration, and permissiveness that says as long as you help us meet the budget, do as you please, but if you get caught, don't say where you attend church. Now I must confess that I am by nature a permissive person. I was raised by permissive parents and I loved it. I was free as the breeze, and did as I pleased from kindergarten on. I was downtown in Sioux Falls, the largest city in South Dakota, as a mere kid from 6 to 9. I was shining shoes and going to shows until dark. I played on railroad tressels, and by the dangerous falls. I went skinny dipping with the older boys and loved my childhood years. Because of that I became a permissive person. I loved the freedom and I survived, and so I just follow the golden rule and give others the same freedom.

I have to remind myself that how I turned out had nothing to do with the permissive life-style I had, but with the grace of God. All three of my closest friends in those permissive years ended up in the state penitentiary. I escaped that destiny only by the grace of God. I found Christ as my Savior at age 9, and this made a radical difference in the way I used my freedom. I choose not to steal with my friends. So what I know from my own experience is that freedom is great, and if you use freedom to choose good rather than evil, then permissiveness is a virtue. But if you use freedom to do evil it is a vice. So what you have is some people who will use their freedom for folly, and you become foolish for allowing them so much freedom. But others will use it for positive and healthy adventure, and you will get credit for being so bold as to allow such freedom.

What is needed then is discernment as to how individuals will use their freedom. If you have a child who will use every opportunity to do something dangerous and stupid you need to be more intolerant of their freedom. If they are responsible and can make wise use of freedom, then you can take more risk. Risk is what it is all about. God took a risk in letting Adam and Eve have access to the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and it was a high risk. They failed the test and fell. You can

argue that God was too permissive, but that is the only way to find out how people will use their freedom. If you allow your child to go off to college, you are taking a high risk. They can use that new found freedom to become irresponsible and damage their lives. But if you don't take the risk, you can never know what their potential could be. Freedom is scary, and it is a gamble, yet there is no choice if you want the best.

So what does this have to do with the letter to the church in Thyatira? Everything! The main vice in this church is their permissiveness and the damage it is doing to the church. The other churches have had external problems and pressure from the community, but this church has an internal problem, and their corruption is an inside job.

The problem was a woman named Jezebel. It is symbolic name, of course, for nobody names their little girl Jezebel. The Jezebel of the Old Testament was a pagan who became the Queen of Israel by marriage to Ahab in about 884 B.C. She killed the prophets of God and brought idolatry and immorality into Israel. She was one of the most wicked women in history. She is the only woman I know of in history who was so evil that she became dog food after her violent death, and dogs ate her body. It was a gruesome judgment and ever since her name has never been found in those books of names for your baby. That name really went to the dogs, and so the only time you use this name is when you want to express contempt.

The original Jezebel was not a believer in the God of Israel. She was said to worship Baal, and when she came to Israel as queen she brought 800 priests of Baal with her. She was a missionary and was determined to promote her religion, which was soon quite popular because sex was part of the ceremony. The more you sowed your wild oats the better your crops would be was the bottom line of this fertility cult. Sex was a part of magic that made nature happy to cooperate. This sexual worship went over big in Israel, and was so successful that Elijah the prophet felt that he was about the only man alive in Israel who was not worshipping Baal. God had to assure him there were 7,000 who had not bowed to Baal, nor kissed him. 7,000 is a lot more than one, but it is a small percentage of a whole nation, and so Elijah was right. It was discouragingly successful to mix sex and religion.

So when we come to the New Testament we discover that there were Christians even who thought it was a good idea to mix sex with their faith. It is probably fortunate that we do not know exactly what this Christian Jezebel was teaching, for if we did it would probably be popular today. All we know is that she was a Christian leader who claimed to be a prophetess, that is one who brought a message to God to His people. Her message was persuading Christian people to practice idolatry and immorality as a legitimate part of their Christian worship. The woman was a teacher in the church and one who professed the gift of prophecy.

Gifts are truly wonderful, and are the key to getting God's work done in this world. But let's face reality: They are also a key problem in the New Testament. People can be gifted by the devil too, and the gifts are often the biggest problem in the church, as we see in the church of Corinth, and here again in Thyatira. This woman was gifted and persuasive. She was charismatic and verse 20 says she was misleading the servants of Jesus. We see that true Christians can be so gullible that they can be manipulated by clever and gifted people into just about anything, including so-called sacred sex.

It was because so many Christians were buying into this "Sex for the saints" package that the

church as a whole was tolerating it. Not all in the church were buying her theology, and they were staying pure in their marriages, but they were not being intolerant of other Christians who were indulging. Here you have a case where Christians are deeply divided on a moral issue. It was hard to take a stand, for it could be your own brother or sister, or even your parents, or child, who was persuaded that Jezebel was a spiritual genius. For the sake of unity you don't want to rock the boat. Jesus does understand the dilemma of the faithful Christians, for He does not pronounce judgment on them, but only on Jezebel and those who follow her. The tolerant and permissive Christians who just passively let this immoral behavior happen without protest, he does not like, but he does not condemn them, but just urges them to stand fast, and not give in on their position.

Jesus recognizes that sometimes a Christian is in a catch 22 ethical dilemma, and does not know what to do, and all he or she can really do is not cooperate with those who teach and practice what is not God's will. Jesus did not expect the faithful Christians to change things, but just to keep pure themselves. He would have to deal with these deceived Christians Himself.

The mercy of Christ is overwhelming in this letter. We tend to see only the judgment, for it is severe, and capital punishment is even involved. But look at verse 21 where Jesus says, "I gave her time to repent, but she was unwilling." The patience and tolerance of Jesus is a wonder. Here is a Jezebel who is using her gifts to dishonor Christ and lead His servants astray, and yet He does not strike her with lightning and quickly bring her to judgment. He gives her time to repent instead. He is ready to forgive and restore even this Jezebel to a place of honor and service in the church. His mercy is beyond our comprehension. Most of us would go full speed ahead on judgment, but Jesus gave her another chance. It is a text like this that makes me very tolerant of fallen Christians. If a Christian has been awful, and has fallen into the pit, but has repented and experienced the forgiving grace of Christ, I see no valid reason for not using that Christian in any way Christ has gifted them to be used. If Jezebel had repented she could have been an honored leader in that church.

In verse 22 Jesus deals with those who commit adultery with Jezebel, and He says they too will suffer intensely unless they repent. Again, I am overwhelmed by the grace of Christ. I am a permissive person by nature and experience, but I do not think I could be as permissive as Jesus is here. He will permit these Christians who have deliberately committed adultery with Jezebel to escape judgment if they repent. I am permissive in the sense that I love to give people freedom, but if they abuse and misuse that freedom, I feel they need to pay a penalty. It is only right that there is a cost for violating the law of God. There is a penalty for violating the laws of men, and so why not more so when we break God's commands? Jesus says judgment is going to fall, and each will be repaid according to their deeds. That only seems right, but Jesus throws in a way of escape by means of repentance. You can seemingly get by with murder if you take this road, for Jesus will permit just about anything if there is repentance.

Every sin Jesus condemns in these 7 churches is neutralized by repentance. Seven times Jesus calls Christians to repent and escape judgment. We tend to think repentance is a word for non-Christians, but this is a major misconception. It was one of Jesus' favorite words to Christians. Jesus cannot tolerate the sins of Christians, and so He warns of judgment to come, but He can tolerate everything if Christians will repent. The number one way for Christians to escape judgment and stay in fellowship with their Lord is to repent. This means every Christian ought to know everything there is know about repentance. You remember the commercial that said, "Orange juice isn't just for breakfast anymore." Well, we can say on the basis of these letters to the 7 churches,

"Repentance isn't just for unbelievers anymore." Christians need to learn to repent to taste the full grace of our permissive Lord. Ignorance here can make you suffer great judgment, and knowledge can lead to a crown.

Before we learn what repentance is we need to understand why it is seldom to never a popular subject on which to preach. The world is so full of neurotic Christians who are feeling guilty about everything under the sun. Nobody wants to add anymore burden to these poor souls who will not step on a crack lest they break their mother's back. Pastors are fearful of attacking immorality lest they make Christians feel guilty about the legitimate joys of sexual passion. Virtue and vice are often so close they seem like twins, and people cannot tell them apart, and so we tend to leave the weeds alone lest we pull up the wheat along with them.

There are so many Christians who feel sinful and guilty about a host of acts and attitudes that are legitimate that it seems cruel to add to their load, and so to be sensitive to these fragile Christians we have gone to the other extreme of hardly ever referring to the real sins of Christians. Jesus, however, does not hesitate to deal frankly with Christian sins, and threaten severe penalty to those who do not repent. I am not interested in adding to the false guilt Christians feel, but these are clear violations of God's will that we ought to feel guilty about, for if we do, we can still escape the judgment by the road of repentance.

Repentance is not a negative thing, but a very positive attitude. It is an awareness that your behavior is not acceptable to God. It is harmful to yourself and others, and is a part of the kingdom of darkness. The examples Jesus uses in these letters of things Christians were guilty are:

1. Forsaking first love, and ceasing to do what you once did for the kingdom.
2. Sexual immorality and idolatry.
3. Tolerating these things openly taught and practiced.
4. Becoming dead, and forgetting there is a job to do for the cause of Christ.
5. Getting so caught up in the things of the world you become indifferent.

You will notice that the majority of Christian sinfulness is in bad attitudes, and not in wicked acts. We focus so much on sinful acts that we neglect the primary area where most Christians fail. We get so caught up in the immorality of the few that we don't even see the sins of the majority, which are bad attitudes of indifference, complacency, and just plain lack of love for God and neighbor. Jesus, however, calls Christians to repent of all these, as well as those guilty of immorality. We get some satisfaction out of Christians who fall into conspicuous sins, because we have not so fallen totally. We forget that our sins may be just as serious to Jesus even though they are only attitudes that make us worthless tools for accomplishing His will in the world. We need to get it straight in our mind that repentance is not just for Christians who have committed some clear violation of the ten commandments. It is for all of us who are in any way hindering the church from being all that Jesus wants it to be. We need to repent and become an asset rather than a liability to the church. This covers just about all of us in some way, and so we all need to know more about the road of repentance. The first thing we need to know about this road is:

I. EVERYONE IS FREE TO TAKE IT.

It is not a toll-way, but a freeway, and there is no discrimination. All races, classes, sexes, and ages are equally welcome. In this way God is absolutely permissive. He will permit anyone to

travel this road and escape the wages of sin. To our natural pharisaical mind this often seems unfair. That rascal, the Prodigal Son, went off and had his fling with wine, women, and song, and yet he was permitted to travel the road of repentance and come home. It did not seem fair to the older brother, and it doesn't seem fair to many of us, but if you want fair, you are under the law. Grace is not fair. It is mercy and forgiveness given to those who do not deserve it. If they deserved it, it would be fair, and a clear matter of the law. But since all have sinned and nobody deserves eternal life, there can be no salvation under the law. If anyone is to be saved there has to be grace.

There are going to be tax collectors and prostitutes in heaven said Jesus. There will be fine religious people who spent their life trying to obey the law who won't make it. That is not fair, but it is the fact, for the law condemns the best of men, and grace saves the worst of men. If you are under the law, you are sunk no matter how good you are. If you are under grace, you have hope no matter how bad you are, for you can travel the road of repentance.

What we need to see is that it is not only for the Prodigal Son, but for the elder son too. If he had traveled this road and repented of his self-righteousness, he too could have been a jewel instead of a jerk. It is a road for the good guys as well as the bad guys. It is the road everyone not only can travel, but must travel to be in a right relationship with Christ. The second this we need to see is:

II. IT IS A ONE-WAY ROAD.

Repentance means to change your direction. It means to turn around and go the other way. To be out of God's will is to be going the wrong way on a one way street. Repentance means to recognize this folly, see the danger of it, and turn around and go the right way; the way that God wills you to go. We think that repentance is just feeling sorry for going the wrong way, but this does not fit the Biblical concept of repentance. You can feel terrible for going the wrong way, but if you keep going that way you have not repented. Repentance means to change the way you are going, and go the right way on the one way road. Feeling bad and sorry is certainly a start, for there is not likely to be a change in direction if one feels just fine about the way they are going. But feelings won't cut it. No matter how awful you feel about going the wrong way you have not repented until you change the way you are going.

Have you ever been on a road you thought was taking you to a certain destination, and then you get doubts because it seems to be taking you the wrong way? The further you go, and the more desolate the area, the more likely you feel you are on the wrong road. If you are super stubborn you will pursue that road even though it takes you down a mud road. But most people come to a point where they realize this cannot be the right way. They find a way to get turned around and head back to find the right way. That is what repentance is. It is accepting the fact that you made a mistake and are taking the wrong way. You feel bad that you have wasted the time and the gas, but you realize wasting more time and gas is not the solution. You have to admit you blew it and turn around to find the right way.

The negative feelings are the acceptance of the bad news that you are on the wrong road. The bad news does come before the good news. You have to be convinced you were going the wrong way before you will have any motivation to turn around and find the right way. The sinner has to feel lost before he feels any need to be saved. The Christian needs to feel bad about his coldness and indifference before he will repent and seek the filling of the Spirit and a flame of concern for a lost

world. We don't want to minimize the need for feelings in repentance, for they are vital, but they are not enough. The bottom line is still a choice of the will to turn around and go the right way.

Change is the essence of repentance. It is to stop doing what you are doing that is not making you an effective Christ-pleasing Christian, and to start doing what does make you that kind of Christian. It is not enough to just feel bad that you are not growing, serving, witnessing, and not being the disciple Jesus needs to touch lives that only you can touch. You have to change and start doing those things that make you a true disciple. Billy Graham says there are three elements in a Christian's repentance. Conviction: a clear sense that I am going the wrong way. Contrition: a feeling of sorrow for the mistaken choices that have led me this wrong way. Change: if there is no change in the behavior and attitude there has been no true repentance. What was the main concern of Jesus in these letters to the seven churches? The answer is in one word-change. He wanted every Christian in every church to be an overcomer, and to in some way change their attitudes and actions to conform to his will.

10. GETTING IN Based on Rev. 3:20 and 21:23-27

Everybody wants to get in on the action. Back in 1982 a crowd began to form one Monday afternoon in December at the River Front Coliseum in Cincinnati. By the time the police arrived at 3:00 P.M., hundreds of fans had gathered at the doors, even though they would not open until 7:00 P.M. The rock group called The Who was to play a concert, and masses of people wanted in. By early evening 8 thousand people were pressing against the doors. The crowd became restless, and somebody broke out a glass and opened a door. The mob surged forward. The police could not stop it, and those who lost their footing were as helpless as if they were in a cattle stampede. After the crowd had passed in, 11 people were left dead, and 8 severely injured. That is just how badly people want to get in some places. It is as if their life depended upon getting in.

It is important to people to get in. They wait in lines all the time to get into a favorite restaurant, or into a movie, or some sporting event. They wait to get into a store, a doctor, or into a line of traffic that is moving. Nobody wants to be left out, and everybody wants to get in somewhere. It can be very embarrassing to be shut out, or to even get just half way in. A young man in Philadelphia was attempting to get into a store at night to rob it. He removed two bolts from the security bars of a window, and began to crawl in. One of the bars came crashing down, and he was trapped. Half of his body was inside the store, and half was dangling outside. It was a real dilemma. He could hang there, or call for help. After a long struggle, he decided to call the emergency 911 number on a phone he could just barely reach. He was terribly embarrassed when the police arrived. He confessed it was his first burglary, and he just couldn't make it in.

It is hard not to be in the in-crowd. That is what the American dream is all about-get in with the best crowd. Get in on the real estate bonanza. Get in on the life style of the rich and famous. We are bombarded by all the media with the message-come with us, follow us, and we will lead the way

to get you in. The theme of politics is, getting in. After all, what good are the best candidates in the world if they can't get into office. You have to get in to have power, and so the name of the game is getting in. Every student has to be concerned about getting into college, and then getting into the right program, and then doing well enough to get into the profession he is aiming for. Life is just one struggle after another to get in.

The refugees of the world are struggling to get in on the affluence of the West. So many cross the borders from Mexico and Central America to get into the U. S. Masses are planning, plotting, and carrying out those plans to get into this country, legally or illegally, because the goal of their life revolves around getting in. God understand this quest of man to get in, for that is God's goal for man also. God wants to get him into that which fulfills all of his dreams, hopes, and desires. The goal of God is to get men into the kingdom of God. The goal of Jesus is to get into the lives of men. He said, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If any man hears my voice and opens the door I will come in." Jesus wants in, because He wants to bring people into His Father's kingdom. This is the highest goal that man can achieve, the letting of Jesus in so they can get in where the whole purpose of life is fulfilled. Getting into God's family, and getting into heaven is where it is at. It is getting in where God wants us to get in.

So often we hear stories about dying and coming to the golden gate and dickering with Peter whether we should be allowed in or not. This would be a tragic mistake to wait until you die to find out if you can get in. The Bible says it is too late then, and if you die before you know the way in, you are out forever. That is the hell of missing heaven. It is to be out with no hope of getting in, and that is our destiny, to get in. To get in anywhere you have to go through the door. There is only one door to God, to heaven, and into the family of God, and that door is Jesus. He said, "I am the Door." He also said, "I am the Way the Truth and the Life, no man comes to the Father but by Me." There is only one way in. There is no possible way to break in by some other door, for there is no other door. The revelation of God is clear, Jesus is the Way, and the only Way.

Some people wait until they have a crisis in their life to come to Christ. We see it even in the Bible. The thief on the cross was near death when he turned to Christ, and asked to be remembered when Jesus came into His kingdom. Jesus said He would be with him in paradise, and so he got in just at the last moment. The Philippian jailer thought his prisoners had escaped and he would be killed for allowing it, and so he was about to kill himself. Paul intervened and showed that the prisoners were all there. The jailer said, "What must I do to be saved?" In other words, how can I get in on what you men have? And Paul said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved." He was so near suicide, and being shut out of God's kingdom forever, but in the crisis he believed in Jesus, and he made it in.

Richard Hillary was one of those spit fire pilots in World War II that Churchill was talking about when he said, "Never was so much owed to so few." He was shot down, and parachuted into the English Channel, and was so badly burned he wanted to die. He thought about the stupidity of war, and wondered what the purpose of life was all about. His mind was forced to think of God as the only reality that could make sense of life, and he found peace as he surrendered to God. He was miraculously found and rescued. He made it back into life, but more important for him, he made it into the kingdom of God. His name was written down in God's book as a child of the King, a member of the family of the redeemed. We all need to ask ourselves-

Is my name written there,
On the page bright and fair?
In the book of God's kingdom,
Is my name written there?

Will you make it in? That is the question of all areas of life, and most important, it is the question of eternal life. Will you make it into that kingdom where sin, sorrow, death, and folly will be no more? You don't have to wait for a crisis. In fact, that is very risky, for people do not get in automatically just because they have a crisis. The best time to get into the kingdom is always right now, for now is always the day of salvation. The greatest question of life is, how do we get into heaven, and into the family of God? Jesus says you get in by giving in. You open your life to Him, and let Him in. You listen for that knock He makes on the door of your heart when the good news of the Gospel is preached. You stop trying to be your own savior and surrender to Him. He wants in because only as He gets in, can He get you in. You let Him in, and He lets you in.

To be born is to get into this world. To be born again is to get into the world to come, which has already begun. To be saved is to taste of the world to come. The greatest mistake of life is to miss the chance to get in on God's best. The greatest wisdom of life is to grab at the chance to get in on God's best. Jesus holds the pen that can write your name in the book of life, and He holds the key that can let you in to the house of God.

Even people who think they want out, really want in. Albert Camus wrote *The Plague*. It is about the town of Oran where the rats began to come out of dark places to die in the streets, and then people began to die the same way. People were dying so fast they were hauling them to the dumps. The town was quarantined, and nobody could get in or out. Dr. Bernard Rieux was the town doctor, and it never occurred to him to get out. He was so busy caring for people. A journalist, named Raymond Rambert, was caught in Oran, but he wanted out desperately. But there was no escape, and so he went on the daily rounds with Dr. Rieux. He was trying to save some of the people, and especially children, so Raymond pitched in and did what he could.

One day a person who was a smuggler offered Rambert a chance to get out for a price, but he decided to stay. Why stay asked the doctor? You have a right to get out and be happy. Rambert explained that he was happy there, for he no longer felt like a stranger, but he felt like he belonged. The point of the story is, you can be happy even in a plague infested world if you know you belong, for that feeling of being in on the family is what life is all about. Life can be hell, but if you know you are in the family of God, and you belong to the only family that will live together forever, you can have peace and be happy even in this plague infested life. All people are in two classes: The whosoever wills, and the whosoever won'ts. The whosoever wills receive Christ as their Savior, and they get the greatest gift man can receive. They receive the gift of getting in, and getting in forever. Now is the time to ask Jesus to be your Lord and Savior, and enter into God's family.

11. RELATIVELY IMPOSSIBLE Based on Rev. 4:1-11

God expects us to do the impossible. He expected Luther H. Bridgers to play the role of Job and keep on singing. He was a young pastor who was away in another city for a series of meetings. The phone rang late one night and a friend had to tell him of the tragic news. Fire had swept through his home and his wife and 2 children perished in the flames. He dropped the receiver and ran out of the hotel into the empty morning streets. He walked for a long time trying to get self-control. He came to a river and felt a compulsion to end his life and be reunited with his family. Life seemed impossible-absolutely impossible. He could not make it on his own.

It was a terrible struggle, but he knew it was God's will that he press on into that impossible future. Years later he married again and raised a second family. He became best known for his song that has been sung by millions. His song goes-

Jesus, Jesus, Jesus,
Sweetest name I know,
Fills my ever longing,
Keeps me singing as I go.

Jesus kept him singing because he was able to look beyond the impossible circumstances and his own weakness to the Lord on the throne, and to his ultimate promises. Paul was going through deep waters and he writes in II Cor. 4:8-9, "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; Persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down but not destroyed." What kept him pressing on being not weary in well doing, but serving and singing the praises of his Lord? He tells us at the end of the chapter in verses 16-18, "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."

What a paradox! The way Paul copes with the impossible is by doing the impossible. He focuses his eyes on what cannot be seen. By seeing the unseen and eternal he is able to be victorious in the visible world of suffering. This teaching runs all through the Bible. It is one of the primary messages of the book of Revelation. The perspective from which you see life makes all the difference in the world. We want to ride on John's coattails as he soars beyond space where no man has gone before, except the Son of Man, and possibly Paul. Paul does not reveal his vision of heaven, and so we do not know if he went to the very throne room of God like John did. First I want to call your attention to 4:1 where we see-

I. THE IMPOSSIBLE COMMAND.

The trumpet like voice of the risen Christ shouted, "Come up here!" Jesus commands John to do the impossible. Do you think John would be languishing on that island as a prisoner if he had the ability to soar off into heaven? He could no more go through that open door to heaven than he could walk on water back to the mainland and be free. Some things we call impossible are really just very hard, but for John to somehow rise up off that island of Patmos and ascend into the realm of heaven was an absolute impossibility from a human perspective. And yet John was soon in heaven seeing the very throne of God just as he was commanded. Here we see the impossible made instantly possible. This reveals just how relative the impossible really is. The fact is, it is almost

impossible to keep anything in the category of the impossible for very long.

It was impossible John to fly in an airplane or a space ship that could blast him beyond the earth's atmosphere. These seemingly absolute impossibilities were really only relative impossibilities, for man has now done what was impossible in the day of John. And so it was never really impossible, but just not available. John could not fax his letters to the 7 churches of Asia either, but not because it was impossible, but because it had not yet been invented. There are literally hundreds of things that were impossible for John that are now possible for us. So the point is, in the light of all the impossible things that are now possible it is nearly impossible to speculate as to what is impossible, for anything we might say could become possible in a short time.

Now if this is true on the human and earthly level, how much more does the sphere of the impossible decrease when we bring the power of Christ into the picture? He commanded John to do what was impossible, but then he made it possible for John to do it. If Jesus wants you to do something, He will make it possible for you to do it. Paul said he could do all things through Christ who would strengthen him. Nothing is impossible if Jesus wills it. He wanted John to come up and see heaven, and in a split second John was in heaven. Either heaven is very close to the island of Patmos, or we are dealing with speeds that make the head swim. We have spacecraft that can circle the globe in minutes, but even to get to the moon takes a while, and beyond that it can take a long time to get anywhere specific. But here we see John going from earth to heaven in the times it takes to end one sentence and begin another. This is impossible with any technology that we know, but it is only relatively impossible because John did it, and this is a hint as to how all of the redeemed will travel in eternity. We will travel with the speed of thought that leaves even the speed of light looking like a one legged turtle with arthritis.

There are many fascinating implications that come out of this instant trip to heaven. It immediately eliminates all concepts of the universe being too vast to explore. No matter how many billions of light years it is across the vast wonder of God's creation, it only takes a second to cover it by thought. We can speculate, in the light of thought travel, that redeemed man will explore everything in the universe, and what doors this will open up is beyond our wildest dreams. If there are many other experiments of God with intelligent beings, we will know this and be able to interact with them, and this may provide the way of service we will offer to God in eternity. None of this will be impossible in the light of what God will make possible with out redeemed bodies.

Another thing that is comforting here is how this scene with John changes my perception of the rapture. I have a fear of heights, and the idea of soaring up into the clouds has never been very appealing to me. But in the light of John's rapture into heaven it no longer needs to be seen as scary for those with a phobia. John was there in an instant. It is not as though he soared through the air whizzing past clouds and then stars with his hair and robe waving in the wind like a flag. He was caught up and was there with no experience of passing through space at all. This is the kind of travel that is only relatively impossible. It is not available to us yet, but it will be our mode of travel for eternity.

The famous Christian mystic Sadhu Sundar Singh said, "In heaven distance is never felt by anyone, for as soon as one forms the wish to go to a certain place he at once finds himself there." All vehicles will be obsolete, and oil companies will no longer have any power at all. Mark Twain wrote a piece about wings in heaven, and he came to what appears to be a very valid biblical

conclusion. He said that wings on angels are like a uniform, and they are only for show and not for travel. That makes sense, for if they were actual flight heaven would be slower than time. Wings are only symbolic of swiftness. They are not the mode of heavenly travel. If that was the case Gabriel would still be on his way to earth with the message of Christmas, and John would still be somewhere in the solar system winging his way toward the throne of God.

If you take this experience of John and start telling people that man has traveled faster than the speed of light, you will be met with words like, "That is impossible." And they would be right, but it still happened, and it will happen all the time, for with God the impossible is just something we are not doing yet on a regular basis. When God says to all the saints what He said to John when He said, "Come up here!" Then we will all be traveling at the speed of thought. The practical implications of this are that we should never be quick to call anything impossible. To assume that anything cannot be done is to shut God out of history. You might be right that it will not be done, but it is only because it shouldn't be done because the time is not yet right. An incurable disease is only a disease that we don't know how to cure yet. But history is full of these impossible to cure diseases that have been cured. All the impossible is, is something that hasn't happened yet. Those who believe this are the ones who always wind up doing the impossible.

When the engineers were called in to evaluate the possibility of building a railroad across the Andes Mountains of Peru they concluded that it could not be done. American engineers were called in, and they agreed it could not be done. As a last resort a Polish engineer named Ernest Malinowski was called in. He said it could be done, and at age 60 he began the task of digging 62 tunnels and building 30 bridges. Once he had to flee the country and remain in exile for a while, but he went back and completed the engineering feat that became one of the wonders of the world in 1880.

The point is that he did the impossible because he believed that the impossible is only relative. Too many Christians give up on projects and become weary in well doing because they feel it is impossible. I know Christians who have ceased to witness to people because they feel it is impossible to change them. Or they give up on study of the Bible and conclude they are just not cut out for it. Or they cease to try to have meaningful devotions because it just doesn't work. On and on go the impossibilities, and they are real, but they are only relatively impossible. If they things God wants you to do, they are very real possibilities. There are many things we will never do, for they are, for all practical purposes, impossible for us to do. This is true for everyone. None of us can leave the body and enter into heaven in a split second. This is impossible because God does not call us to do it, but if He did, it would be just as possible for us as it was for John.

We can do anything God calls us to do, and so we need to be ever striving for higher goals. There are many examples of people who have achieved seemingly impossible goals that no one would have ever dreamed. Bob Richards, the famous Olympic champion, was teaching a Sunday School class many years ago, and he was expounding on the theme of self-confidence, and of being all you can dream of being. There was a girl in the class who was about 100 pounds overweight, and she had the audacity to take him seriously. She began to jump up and down and say, "I'm going to be a great tennis champion." Richards was embarrassed, for he knew she was an exception to his message. But she didn't know any better, and she believed that by God's help she could become a tennis champion. She was Billy Jean Moffitt then, but she became known the world over as Billy Jean King-the greatest woman tennis player in the world. It was highly unlikely, but only relatively impossible, for she was inspired to make it possible. It is fear of failure that makes it impossible for

us to achieve our dreams. We need to learn to take risks and believe that with God all things are possible.

The impossible is always possible if God calls you to do it, but if it is not God's will, then it may be just plain impossible. If John would have decided that he was bored on that deserted island and decided that he would rather take a trip to heaven he would have chosen an impossible path to follow. He only did the impossible because he was called to do it. God is calling us all to that which is impossible without His power and grace, but how often are we not listening and responding because we have already determined that we cannot do it. Almost every wonderful thing ever done in history was declared impossible before it was done. Napoleon Hill wanted to be a writer as a boy, but he was poor and could not get a good education. Everybody told him that it was impossible. But he saved his pennies and finally got enough to buy a big beautiful dictionary. The first thing he did was to take a pair of scissors and cut the word impossible out of it. He then went on to become a famous writer who influenced millions.

In San Juan there is a tribe of people called the Chamulas. They have not trusted outsiders since the Spanish Conquest. Those conquerors betrayed them to get their gold, and they became a closed society. Ken Jacobs and his wife tried to take the Gospel to these people, but soon became discouraged and understood why they were called the impossible people. It looked hopeless, but they obeyed God anyway and began to translate the Bible into their language. Five years later the man who helped them became a Christian. One by one others came, and when the New Testament was finished 500 of them sold in just 20 minutes. Today there is a well established church with hundreds of believers in the midst of the impossible people, or more accurately the relatively impossible people.

The point of this message is not to motivate you to go out and try to do a lot of impossible things. The point is to stop telling yourself the lie that nothing can be done in impossible situations. Sammy Tippit is an international evangelist, and he illustrates the point. He had spent a week in meetings at a university and then boarded a plane to fly home. He was seated next to a lady with a screaming baby. As the plane took off the baby screamed louder and louder. The mother was very frustrated, and it was an intolerable situation, and he felt helpless and miserable. That is when it is time for a Christian to get his eyes off the situation and on to Jesus. He began to worship the Lord in his heart and listen for an answer. Tippit saw that he must do what Jesus would do. He said to the distraught mother, "Can I play with the baby?" She immediately said, "Please do." He began to make faces and talk silly to the baby and got the baby to calm down. He thought to himself, "Is this what it means to be filled with the Holy Spirit?"

The mother was grateful for his help that she began to ask him many questions, and he was able to share Christ with her. She began to weep and told how her mother-in-law had become a Christian just a few weeks ago, and she had told her and her husband about Jesus. She said, "I'm going to pray that God will send you someone to explain His salvation more fully." There Tippit sat on the plane realizing he was the answer to that mother's prayer. He could have lost that temper and scolded that mother and had a miserable trip. He could have felt justified in so dealing with an impossible situation, but by the grace of God and his willingness to seek the mind of Christ he was able to fulfill the plan of God.

Robert Mallet said, "It is not impossibilities that fill us with the deepest despair, but possibilities which we have failed to realize." If only we could realize that in every impossible situation there

lurks the possibility for us to do the good, acceptable and perfect will of God. If we could see from this perspective, it would change how we react to life's problems and burdens and make far more effective tools for the kingdom of God.

12. PROGRESS IN HEAVEN Based on Rev. 7:13-17

The story is told of an old farmer who frequently gave his testimony at prayer meetings, and it was always the same. He would say, "I am not making much progress, but I am established." One spring this farmer was hauling logs when his wagon sank into the mud in a soft spot in the road. As he sat there reviewing the situation a neighbor came by and said, "I see everything is normal. You aren't making any progress, but you are established." Many people feel established when they are really only stuck. The fact is, progress is essential to the Christian life, for not to be moving ahead is to be slipping back.

Two Irishmen were walking from New York to Yonkers. After a long walk they inquired from a man how far it was to Yonkers. "Five miles," he replied. After walking again for a considerable time they asked another passer-by. He also said it was five miles. They pursued their journey and finally asked a 3rd man. "Its just five miles," he responded. One of the Irishmen said to the other, "Well, we're holding our own anyway." The fact is, they were losing ground, for all of their efforts was getting them no nearer to their destination. You are not holding your own if you are not moving forward.

Progress is linked to the idea of the abundant Christian life. Paul had not attained all that Christ saved him for, but he was ever pressing on to reach it. That is the motive of all who really understand that life and growth go together. Longfellow in A Psalm Of Life wrote,

Not enjoyment, and not sorrow,
Is our destined end or way;
But to act that each tomorrow
Finds us further than today.

It is universally recognized that progress is essential in this life, but this unity does not continue when we look at eternal life. Christians generally have not thought very deeply about life in heaven, and the result is they tended to jump to the conclusion that progress ends in heaven. This is based on the assumption that once we are made perfect, and once we become like Christ, there is no further room for progress. I Cor. 13:12 is the text usually used to confirm this conviction. It says, "Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood."

This text has led Christians to stop thinking about heaven and all of its infinite potential. They assume that they will be at once all they will ever be, and so they lose the motivation to gaze into eternity with enthusiasm, like those who are convinced that progress will be a part of all eternity. My purpose in this message will be to expose you to the great Christian minds who see perpetual possibilities even after we become like Jesus.

The foundational theological principle for this view is very simple. The finite can never become equal with the infinite. In other words, just because we become like Jesus does not mean we become equal to Him, and just because we gain an understanding of all God's plan and purpose in history does not mean we know all that God knows, or that we understand all of the mysteries and purposes of God for other worlds throughout eternity. Those who assume that we will cease to make progress have too small a view of God, and too limited a view of His infinite wisdom.

Charles Spurgeon was one who had a vast view of eternity and of God, and thus of progress. He wrote, "As eternity goes on, I have no doubt that the Savior will be indicating fresh delight to His redeemed. "Come hither," saith he to his flock, "Here are yet more flowing streams." He will lead them on and on, by the century, aye, by the chiliad, from glory unto glory, onward and upward in growing knowledge and enjoyment. Continually will he conduct his flock to deeper mysteries and higher glories. Never will the inexhaustible God who has given Himself to be the portion of His people ever be fully known, so that there will eternally be sources of freshness and new delight, and the Shepherd will continue to lead His flock to these living fountains of water. He will guide them-

From glory unto glory, that ever lied before,
Still widening, adoring, rejoicing more and more,
Still following where He leadeth from shining field to field,
Himself our goal of glory, Revealer and Revealed!

If Spurgeon was alone in this conviction, we could say he was just an eccentric dreamer, but the fact is, most everyone of the great Christian minds that have delved deeply into the study of God's eternal plan feel the same as Spurgeon. Jonathan Edwards, one of the greatest minds America ever produced, and one of the world's most brilliant preachers and theologians, felt that God's infinite creativity will call for periodic changes in the glory of the eternal kingdom. Just as women change their furniture around and get new things, so God will provide infinite variety throughout eternity.

Jonathan Edwards is most famous for his history changing sermon *Sinners In The Hands Of An Angry God*. Few people know that he was a great student of heaven. He argued much for Christians to recognize that there will be eternal progress. He wrote, "That the gloried spirits shall grow in holiness and happiness in eternity, I argue from this foundation, that their number of ideas shall increase to eternity." He goes on to explain what he means by pointing out that after a million years in eternity we will not have the same number of limited ideas that we had the day we entered heaven. Heaven will not be so dull and uneventful that there is nothing to remember.

Even if there were only one new thing every million years, that would be progress, but this is folly, for we know God will have infinite variety for us. There will be endless new relationships with the saints from all parts of the world and all times in history, and this will mean endless progress. The only way to escape it would be to make heaven like hell where each is kept in solitary confinement, and unable to form any new relationship, or convey any new knowledge. The Bible tells us, however, that even in hell there is progress, for the rich man who died came to learn by his tragic end the folly of neglecting God's Word. He requested that his brothers be warned lest they too be fools as he was. That was an enormous step of progress.

How could anyone think that the saints in heaven will never gain any new insights? Edwards says that they will go on forever growing in their knowledge of God and His works, and the more

they do, the more they will love Him, and the greater will be their delight in heaven. Eternal life meant eternal growth, and not eternal stagnation. If the plant kingdom is so redeemed that the tree of life will bring forth 12 kinds of fruit with a new one each month, as we read in Rev. 22:2, it is inconceivable that man will be locked into a state where growth is not possible. The objection is that perfection does not need growth and new experiences, but this is not so, for God is perfect and yet does experience what is new.

Did the world always exist, or was it a new idea when God said let there be light, and He began the creation? Jesus did not always exist as a man, and so the incarnation was a new experience for Him. The angels in heaven rejoice when a sinner repents because a new name is written down in glory, and a new relationship develops between God and that man. It is new for God as well as man. God is continually having new experiences, and so He has what can be called growth even in perfection.

The new heaven and new earth already exist in God's mind, but it will be a new experience for God, as well as man, when it will become actual and we will relate to Him in a new way in that new world. There is no escaping it, for even a perfect God does experience what is new. He does not make progress in the sense of going from less perfect to more perfect, but He progresses in the experiencing of His infinite wisdom as it is expressed in new and creative ways. He is a Person and not a computer. He is free to do what He has never done before, and can anyone believe He will let eternity go by with never a new idea to add to the joys and pleasures of the redeemed?

The nature of God demands that we believe in eternal progress. Jesus is making progress now as He reigns at the right hand of the Father until all enemies are put under His feet. He is moving forward to the day of final victory over all evil. Are we to suppose that when that battle is won and He reigns supreme with evil no longer a menace that He will no longer have anything for us to do but to rest in peace forever on a sort of endless vacation? Wars are won to eliminate that which hinders progress so that we can get on with what really matters. It is hard to imagine that the whole battle with evil in human history will be won so that people of God can stop their pressing on to new heights in their relationship to God. It seems more reasonable to believe that with evil out of the way man can then really begin to grow.

It is nothing short of presumption to assume that the day you enter heaven you will be as advanced in your wisdom, knowledge, and relationship to God as Abraham who has had a 4000 year head start on you, or the Apostle Paul with a 2000 year head start. It is even more presumption to assume that you will know God on your first day in heaven as well as you will a year later, or a million years later. Instead of exalting God to the level of the infinite you lower God to the level of your finite capacity when you think there is no room for progress in heaven.

John Bunyan in his vision of heaven has Elijah explaining to him, "But as to that which you object, that happiness cannot be complete, and yet admit of new additions, I must tell you that when the soul and body both are happy, as mine now are, I count it a complete state of happiness, for through all the innumerable ages of eternity, it is the soul and body joined together in the blessed resurrection state that shall be the continued subject of this happiness. But in respect of the blessed object of it, which is the ever-adorable and blessed God, in whose blissful vision this happiness consists, it is for ever new for the divine perfections being infinite, nothing less than eternity can be sufficient to display their glory, which makes our happiness eternally admit of new additions, and by

a necessary consequence our knowledge of it shall be eternally progressive too."

The knowledge of eternal progress can be so encouraging to the those who feel this life has not been all they wish. Ian Maclaren wrote, "Heaven is not a Trappist monastery, never is it retirement on a pension. No, it is a land of continual progress. One translation of the words of Jesus, "In my Father's house are many mansions," renders them, "In my Father's house are many stations;" because Jesus implies that heaven will afford opportunity for endless adventurous and abundant living. "What an encouragement," one exclaims, "To all those who have ever arrived on earth, to all who were cut off before the song was sung, or the picture painted, or the vision realized."

One of the most powerful reasons to believe it is the picture you get if it was not so. If the thief who died with Jesus does not grow, he will be a poorly prepared person for paradise. Some actually believe that those, like him, who accept Christ late in life, and who have not developed a Christian knowledge of the Word of God, will have to live on a low level of knowledge forever. They feel they are locked in when you die. Where you are then, you will be forever. Many Christians will be locked in on a very low level while others will be very high. There is truth to this for the beginning of heaven, but to lock people into their state at death forever is to introduce part of hell into heaven, and it robs God of His infinite mercy which delights to see His children press on to make all of their potential actual.

The text in verse 17 says that Jesus will be our Shepherd even in heaven, and He will guide us to springs of living water. If we are perfect, we should not need a guide any longer, but the fact is we will always need Jesus as our guide, for we will always be followers and learners, and for all eternity Jesus will teach us and lead us into greater experiences of God's grace and glory. This is the conviction of the great servants of God through history, and they base it on the nature of God. If your view of God is great enough, you will have doubt about progress in heaven.

13. THE ULTIMATE WEDDING Based on Rev. 19:1-9

Romance is the greatest power in the universe. It is the motivating power that will produce the new heaven and the new earth, and it is the power behind much of what has been created in this earth. The spectacular Hilton Hotel chain that goes around the world is a good example. It was not just the love of money and power that moved Conrad Hilton to build this vast empire. In his autobiography, *Be My Guest*, he tells of a turning point of his life while in Dallas. It happened in church.

"All I saw of her at first was a jaunty red hat and a few curls several pews in front of me at church. The hat was dark red and the curls were very black and there was something about the way she wore the hat, the way she carried her head, she was very attractive. When I saw her face, pretty, vivacious, alert, with laughing eyes, in my excitement I did something worthy of a college freshman.

I followed the red hat out of church to try to find out where

she lived. For once I wished I hadn't so many friends to greet. I'm afraid I was abrupt. But as it was, the red hat got such a long start on me that, after seeing it bob up and down in the crowd for a couple of blocks, I lost it.

For a month of Sundays I amazed that congregation with my piety. I attended every mass from six till noon. But I didn't see her again."

One afternoon as he left his theater where business was going bad, he walked right into that same girl. She had on a different hat, but it was her, and she was with a Mrs. Evans whom he knew. Mrs. Evans introduced him to Mary Barron. They entered at once into a whirlwind courtship. She had to leave Dallas, but he insisted that when he finished building a hotel she come back and marry him. He also insisted she give him her red hat. He writes again:

"There was the incurable romantic coming out again. It was now my firm intention to sprinkle stars in Mary's lap, and I would go back into the fight, climb my mountain, as her champion. In the days when Arthur was king, I would have worn her colors on my sleeve.

In Dallas, Texas, in 1924, I had to content myself with flying the red hat from my bedpost.

Then I went back to my mountain with renewed vigor."

He was soon back on top and very successful, and he married Mary and took her into the world of the rich and famous. It is a beautiful love story, but it has one major flaw. They did not live happily ever after. Eight years later their marriage ended in a bitter divorce.

Falling in love is the easy part. The living happily ever after is the hard part. But the fact is, the greatest love story of all time and eternity does end this way, which means it never ends at all, for Christ and His bride live happily ever after. Heaven is an eternal honeymoon where the bride and groom enjoy endless bliss with no fear of conflict. The goal of God is achieved when He gets His Son, the most famous single in all of human history, married. When Jesus gets married at the great wedding of the Lamb, then singleness will cease to exist, and all will be as it was in the garden of Eden: One couple-a husband and wife-and Adam and Eve. In eternity it will be the one groom-the second Adam-Jesus. His bride is the church- the second Eve. The new heaven and the new earth will be their wedding gift from God. This is the beginning of the most romantic adventure conceivable as this happy couple, perfect in themselves, enjoy together a perfect universe forever.

There will be no singles in heaven, for all who are there are part of the bride. There have been many great singles all through history. John the Baptist, The greatest of the Old Testament saints, was single. Paul, the greatest of the New Testament saints, was also single. Volumes could be filled with the stories of the famous singles who have served the kingdom of God with great success. But all this will be over in heaven, for there will only be married people in heaven. Some ask, will marriage last forever? The answer is yes. People will not be marrying each other, but they will be wedded to the Lamb, and be His bride forever. Christian husbands and wives

will together be part of the Bride. Their love for each other will not be diminished, but rather enhanced. Their primary loyalty, however, will be to the Lamb.

The wedding is called the Wedding of the Lamb, and the Wedding Supper of the Lamb, because it is the sacrifice of Christ on the cross that made it possible for the bride to be there redeemed and made clean and whole, and fit to be the bride of the Son of God. In chapter 18 fallen man in his folly and wickedness is called a harlot.

In this chapter the redeemed and forgiven are called the bride. The Bible gives the female equal time in its symbolism. On the cross we see two men, one of whom represents the rejecters of Christ, and the other represents the receptors of Christ.

From that cross setting one of them goes to hell, and the other to heaven. Now in Revelation 18 and 19 we see all mankind represented by two females. The one is a harlot who is destroyed, and the other a pure bride who is exalted. All mankind ends up either a harlot in hell, or a bride in heaven.

This means the whole Christian life is preparation for a wedding-a wedding that will begin eternity, and be the final wedding that will not only end all singleness forever, but also all divorce forever. Paul in II Cor. 11:2 writes, "I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to Him." Paul saw his task in life as preparing the bride for the Wedding of the Lamb. We call it a lot of things: Church planting, evangelism, discipleship, sanctification, etc., but they all point to the ultimate wedding.

The problems Paul had were due to the bride becoming infatuated with an impostor. The church was letting this rival to Christ win their affections. The battle of history has been to keep the bride of Christ loyal to the Lamb. So all of history is a matter of romantic conflict. Satan's goal is to seduce the bride and make her a part of his harlot. The Savior's goal is to make her holy, and as Paul says in Eph. 5:27, "To present her to Himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless."

So all of life is wedding preparation, and it is a hassle because Satan is trying to postpone the wedding and get the bride to break the engagement. The task of the church is to overcome, and press on to the wedding, and be ready to marry into wealth and power beyond imagination. The bride who marries the King of Kings-the ruler of the entire new universe-will be the Queen of Heaven, and the most powerful and wealthy Queen that has ever existed. This is the destiny of the Bride of the Lamb.

What would it be like to marry the richest man in town, or the country, or the world? It is an interesting fantasy, but the promise of God is that all who love Christ as Savior in this life will be married to Him in the life to come. They will be the wife of the richest man in the universe. You talk about marrying up! The rag girl in the slums marrying the prince pales with comparison to this true romance of the former slave girl, in bondage to Satan, rescued, redeemed, and restored to purity, becoming the Bride of the Lamb. No wonder the whole first part of this chapter is a Hallelujah Chorus. The greatest love story of all is about to be concluded in the grandest of all weddings.

Long, long deferred, now come at last,
The Lamb's glad wedding-day.
The guests are gathering to the feast,

The seats in heavenly order placed,
The royal throne above the rest-
How bright the new array!

Sorrow and sighing are no more,
The weeping hours are past.
To-night the waiting will be done,
To-night the wedding robe put on,
The glory and the joy begun-
The crown has come at last.

What is heaven like? There are many answers, but one of the best is, it will be like a royal wedding with feasting, rejoicing, and all the pleasures that accompany such a gala occasion, and all Christians will be the Bride at that wedding. Here at last the bride is complete and ready for the wedding. Jesus did not marry in time, for He chose to wait for a bride fit for Him—a bride made perfect by His own sacrifice. A greater than Solomon is here, for in Christ we see a King of greater wisdom, and with far greater riches and power, and even a bridal suite more vast than Solomon's. For though he had 700 wives and 300 concubines from many lands, the bride of Christ will be composed of the redeemed out of every tribe, tongue, and nation, and there will be millions upon millions. This wedding of the Lamb will make the best wedding of Solomon look like a five minute justice of the peace service. A lot of Christians could never afford a big wedding, but they will be in the biggest wedding ever as the Bride, and God Himself will foot all the bills.

In Judaism the groom would come to the home of the bride and take her to his home. The second coming of Christ will be His coming for his bride to take her to His home in heaven where the wedding feast will take place. At last a supper that the bride herself does not have to prepare. I can't swear to it that pot lucks will be gone in heaven, but you can count on it that the bride will not have to bring a hot dish, salad, or dessert to this wedding feast. Some feel God must be part Baptist, for He begins eternity with a supper. Eating is one of the favorite things Christians do all through time, and so why not value that in eternity and celebrate it with feasting?

God has not revealed many details about this biggest wedding banquet ever. We don't know if angels will be the caterers, nor do we know the menu. There are some who feel it is silly to think we will eat in heaven, but it is even more silly to try and imagine the greatest feast ever, but with no food. Jesus ate food in His resurrected body, and there is no reason whatever to doubt that we will enjoy this basic pleasure in our resurrected bodies. It is not very exciting to read of the tree of life in Revelation 22 that bears a new fruit every month if that fruit is never enjoyed. It produces a new fruit every month, and is, therefore, a symbol of abundance, but what good is abundance if we must gather it up each month and dispose of it without ever enjoying the taste of it? The whole point of the revelation is that we will have no limitations like Adam and Eve did in the first paradise. They could eat of all the trees but one. We will eat of all plus one—the tree of life that gives life and joy and pleasure forever. The Bride of the Lamb will not have less than the bride of the first Adam, but infinitely more.

The imagery here of a wedding is to convey the message of the marvelous joy of the uniting of God and man in this ultimate and intimate way. God and man actually get married and become a couple. You could very well get locked up for saying it, but the fact is, a single Christian could say,

"I'm not married now, but someday I'm going to be married to God and be Queen of the universe." It sounds like delusions of grandeur, but what it is, is the promise of God. It is what heaven is all about. It is about a marriage that finally fulfills a universal dream of being married and living happily ever after.

This Wedding of the Lamb is a great day, not just for the Bride, but for the Lamb and for the Father. God has had a lot of marriage problems, and this marks the end of all those problems with a happy marriage forever. God has not exactly been what we call lucky in love. In the first place he picked a lemon for a bride. He chose Israel to be His bride and she turned out to be a harlot going to bed with every sweet talker who came down the pike. God finally had to get a divorce. Jeremiah describes it in Jer. 3:6-8. "Have you seen what faithless Israel has done? She has gone up on every high hill and under spreading tree and has committed adultery there. I thought that after she had done all this she would return to me but she did not.....I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries." If you are unforgiving to divorced people, then you are one who refuses to forgive God, for He was divorced, and that is not a very comfortable position to be in.

God is not faithless to His bride, however, and He goes on courting her, and in 3:14 He says to her, "Return, faithless people, declares the Lord, for I am your husband." God pursued His bride like Hosea pursued his faithless wife, and in Hosea 2:19-20 he declares, "I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the Lord." Isa. 62:5 records the same optimism: "As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you." The marital battle of God continues with the new Israel, the church, but at last the battle is won, and all rivalry is defeated, and God finally reigns supreme. Now at last He can enjoy a faithful wife who loves no other but Him. The marriage of others is minimized in heaven because the focus is on God finally having a loyal loving bride. There is marriage in heaven. In fact, there is nothing else but marriage. It is in hell where there will be no marriage, and all will be an existence of isolated aloneness with no relationships whatever.

All of history is God's battle to woo and win His bride, and all of eternity is the honeymoon. History begins with a marriage of Adam and Eve, and eternity begins with a marriage of God and man. The creation of a wife for Adam was a snap. A little nap and a little surgery, and Adam had his wife. Getting a wife for the second Adam was a much more radical process. Jesus, the second Adam, did not just go to sleep, but had to die and have his side split open by a spear. His wife was far more costly. He had to give His life to purchase her, and then give many hundreds of years of guidance, forgiveness, and intercession to get His bride prepared. Marriage is no secondary theme. It is the theme of life for time and eternity. It is the alpha and omega of relationships. It is the foundation for history and heaven. Everything we do either helps or hinders our temporal or eternal marriage. Even singles are perpetually involved in that which enriches their relationship to Christ, or poisons it. Nobody can escape the need for marriage enrichment, for that is what life is all about.

The Lamb is our fiancée, and we are perpetually pleasing Him in our preparation for the wedding, or we are displeasing Him, and causing a delay, for there will be no wedding until the Bride is completely ready. This is an interesting phrase to pursue. Verse 7 says the Bride has made herself ready. Why do we go to church? Why

do we read the Bible? Why do we pray and witness, and do all that we do as Christians? We do so in preparation for the wedding. You might feel a little sheepish telling someone you are going to marry a Lamb, but that is what the Christian life is all about. It is getting ready for the wedding of the Lamb, and becoming worthy of the honor of being the Bride of the Son of God.

God wants nothing but the best for His Son, and we should desire to be all He desires; to be clean and beautiful. Why do we not do what is wrong and displeasing to God? Because it makes us not fit to be the Bride of the Lamb. He gave His life for us. He expects us to be sacrificial in preparing for the wedding. Weddings are costly, but for this one, the biggest cost for us is in preparation. Being willing to be what He wants His bride to be is our goal.

I wondered as I studied this imagery of the Bride if this is one of the reasons it is easier for a female to become a Christian than it is for a male. The latest study shows that more women are Christians than men. It seems so natural for a female to prepare to become a bride, but this is not that appealing for the male. Males do not grow up with the fantasy of being a beautiful bride dressed in an awesome wedding gown. This is a bit of an adjustment for the male mind, that in eternity all Christians will be a part of the Bride. In looking for poetry describing this greatest of all weddings, I discovered that the female mind seems to be more interested in writing poetry about this event than the male mind. E. H.. Bickersteth and Christina Rossetti wrote:

The Bridegroom met the Bride alone. Himself,
In glorified humanity supreme,
Incarnate Light: And she like Him in glory,
No spot nor wrinkle on her holy brow,
No film upon her robes of dazzling white,
Most beautiful, most glorious: every saint
Perfect in individual perfectness;
And each to each so fitly interlinked,
Joined and compact, there countless millions seemed
One body by one spirit inspired and moved,-
The various members knit in faultless grace,
The feeblest as the strongest necessary,
No schism, nor discord, nor excess, nor lack.

Glory touched glory on each bended head,
Hands locked dear hands never to sunder more:
These were the new-begotten from the dead
Whom the great Birthday bore.

Heart answered heart, soul answered soul at rest,
Double against each other, filled, sufficed;
All loving, loved of all; but loving best
And best beloved of Christ.

Caroline Noel wrote,

Bride, adoring, thinks upon that hour

Ere her Lord gave Himself to Deaths dark power,
When at the Passover He lifted up
His eyes to heaven, and having given the cup,
He said: "O Father, I Thy work have done;
Into Thy glory now call Thy Son:
I will that she I ransom, as My Bride
Be with Me in My glory at Thy side."
And the strong might of that prevailing prayer
Has brought her to His throne and glory there.
Uplift the trumpets! Wake the harp-strings now,
And let the voice of many waters flow!

All Christians are the Bride, but all agree that there will not be a loss of our individuality. Men need not fear they will become feminine forever and lose their masculine personality. I do not know if L. M. Wooster is a male or female, but he or she has summed up this conviction held by all in a concise paragraph.

Even at that wonderful banquet, where the guests
are the angels and archangels, thrones, principalities,
and powers, and the inhabitants of the universe;
when the Lord shall drink with His Bride and His
guests of the "new wine" of perfect love and bliss;
when every heart will beat as one in perfect sympathy,
even there each one of us will stand out clear and
unmistakable in his or her own individual character,
attainments, and spirit.

Nevertheless, we cannot escape the fact that all of the imagery of heaven revolves around the Bride and her beautiful dress and jewelry. It is a very feminine picture, and the reason for this, I am sure, is because the objective is to portray heaven as the most beautiful place possible, and the feminine imagery is the key to portraying beauty. I've heard people say to the groom, "Nice tux," but you don't hear oh's and ah's, and conversation about it like the wedding gown of the bride. It is her beauty and the beauty of her accessories that gets the attention. In chapter 21 verse 2 we read, "I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a Bride beautifully dressed for her husband." Later in the chapter she is described with all her brilliant jewels.

God loves His bride beautifully dressed and adorned with jewels. If we go back to Ezek. 16 we read this description of God preparing Israel to be His bride. "I clothed you in fine linen and covered you with costly garments. I adorned you with jewelry; I put bracelets on your arms and a necklace around your neck, and I put a ring on your nose, earrings on your ears and a beautiful crown on your head." It has always puzzled me why some Christians have a problem with jewelry. In both the Old Testament and the New Testament God tells us His taste in beauty, and He likes a woman who is adorned with beautiful clothes and jewelry. As the Bride of the Lamb we will all be so adorned in eternity. Everything that is not beautiful is gone forever, and everything we can conceive of that enhances beauty will be there in abundance.

Psa. 45 is a wedding song. Listen to its description of an earthly wedding of a king of Israel, and just imagine how much more glorious will be the wedding of God's Son and His Bride.

8 your robes are all fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia. From ivory palaces stringed instruments make you glad;
9 daughters of kings are among your ladies of honor; at your right hand stands the queen in gold of Ophir.
10 Hear, O daughter, consider, and incline your ear; forget your people and your father's house;
11 and the king will desire your beauty. Since he is your lord, bow to him;
12 the people of Tyre will sue your favor with gifts, the richest of the people
13 with all kinds of wealth. The princess is decked in her chamber with gold-woven robes;
14 in many-colored robes she is led to the king, with her virgin companions, her escort, in her train.
15 With joy and gladness they are led along as they enter the palace of the king.

Even if you have seen the wedding of royalty, you haven't seen anything yet, for the wedding of the Lamb is the ultimate wedding. God will spare no expense or creative excellence, for this is the wedding of His only begotten Son who laid down His life for his Bride. There is no point in speculation, but it goes without saying, the richest men of all history combined could not afford what we will see at this wedding. The whole world could go into bankruptcy and not be able to put together a wedding so glorious for so many hundreds of millions of people.

Revelation 21 describes the city where the wedding will take place and it is 1500 miles long and wide. We are talking of a city that covers from Maine to Florida, and half way across the United States from East to West. This vast city is made of gold, and the walls are decorated with every kind of precious stone. Imagine, if you take all of the jewelry in the country you could decorate only a small fraction of a wall like that. I doubt if all the jewelry in the world could get the job done for more than a couple of miles. We are talking splendor beyond earthly imagination. All the gold in Fort Knox, which is mind boggling, would only pave a few miles of this golden city.

The point is, man has never seen a wedding like the Wedding of the Lamb. To be there will make up for all the glorious events you may have missed in life because you could not afford it, or lack the status to be involved. In Christ the best is yet to be, and people who could not afford a fancy wedding will be a part of the fanciest wedding ever. As God brought beautiful Eve to Adam to begin human history, so He will bring the beautiful church to Christ to wrap up history, and begin eternity with a marriage that will last forever. The goal of history is achieved in the happy marriage of God and man. This is the ultimate wedding.

14. A PAIN FREE PARADISE Based on Rev. 21:1-8

If you are rich enough, you can even enjoy your own funeral. Colorado farmer Jim Gernhart proved this over and over. It all began in 1951 when he decided to rehearse his own funeral. He rented the Armory in Burlington, Colorado, hired a pastor, and had a lavish display of flowers and a good meal for 1,000 mourners. It cost him over 15,000 dollars for this mock funeral. But he so enjoyed it that for the next 22 years he had an annual funeral until he died at age 97. He earned the nickname, the living corpse. This is certainly covering the theme-prepare to meet thy God-to an

extreme.

For most people, even the rich, this would be a pain rather than a pleasure, to go through 23 rehearsals for your own funeral. But the story does reveal the complexity of dealing with the whole issue of pain and pleasure. God tells us in Rev. 21:4 that there will be no pain in heaven. This is certainly among the greatest hopes that the mind of any man or woman can hold. But it is a challenge to the mind to deal with all the implications of this one promise of God. It raises many profound questions like: 1. If pain is done away with, does this mean pain is evil in itself? 2. If there is no pain in heaven, does this mean all the saints will love and enjoy the same things, and the diversity of time will be eliminated? Right now it is a pain for many to sit through a symphony, while others consider it one of their highest pleasures. Some Christians enjoy certain types of food which others find distasteful. Diversity covers many areas of life. Will all this be gone in heaven, and all Christians be alike?

Pain and pleasure are subjects that every human experiences, but they do not necessarily do a lot of thinking about them. I want to challenge you to do so, for they are Biblical subjects and subjects that are relevant to every life. The first thing I want to consider is-

I. THE PARADOX OF PAIN.

Pain is both a burden and a blessing. We don't have to spend much time establishing the negative side, for all of us have had pain that was pure agony, and with no value of which we are aware. If we go back to the earliest records we have of human writing, we go back to the cuneiform writing on clay tablets from Nippur, and we read this prayer of the daughter of the king of Babylon: "Pain has seized my body. May God tear this pain out." The study of man is the study of how to triumph over pain.

Pain entered this world through sin. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God they turned a paradise of pleasure into a place of pain, for God's judgment was that Eve would have increase pain in childbirth, and Adam would have to suffer in painful toil to produce food from the cursed land. Pain was the beginning of the end of paradise, and all through the Bible and history we see the damage that pain does. Find one man or woman in the Bible who did not suffer negative pain. It is so universal that it goes even one step beyond sin. When we talk of sin there is always one exception-the Lord Jesus. But when we talk of pain He is no longer an exception, but rather, a prime example of the curse of pain. He suffered the very pains of hell, as well as the pain of human rejection and cruelty.

You cannot study any life in history where pain has not played its evil role. Columbus had his painful attacks of gout. Luther and Calvin both had such migraine headaches they could scarcely speak. Napoleon's gastric problem made him write, "The pain cuts like a knife." Beethoven suffered horribly from gall stone colic. Moliere had such pain while performing his own play that he died hours later. Maupassant inhaled ether during his attacks of headache.

The list could go on endlessly, for there are no famous people who have escaped the curse of pain. But the paradox is, pain can also be a blessing, and this too is universal. The pain of childbirth is negative, yet none of us would be here, and none of us would have the joy of children

and grandchildren without this pain. The very blessings of life, love, and family, come to us by means of the painful route of childbirth.

Pain is also the route by which we grow. We call them growing pains. It is the pain of stretching the muscles that makes them better muscles. It is by the pain of exercise that we become stronger and healthier. When I play a couple of hard sets of tennis, I usually suffer pain, but it is a sort of pleasurable pain, for I know my body is better for the exercise. There is no progress in any respect without pain, and so the pain is a form of pleasure, for pain is a symbol of progress. Pain is the price paid for progress in freedom all through history. The Colombian National Anthem has this line, "In furrows of pain, good now germinates." Every good thing we enjoy has come out of the pain of those who have gone before. The pain of high risk and hard work. If not for the pain of the founding fathers, and the pilgrims and pioneers, we would not have a long list of things for which to thank God. If it was not for the pain of Christ and His church through the ages, we would have nothing for which to give thanks.

Positive pain has played a major role in everything we call our blessings in time. Our life, our freedom, and our salvation are all based on the pain of others. Pain has many positive purposes in time.

1. It teaches compassion. It is your pain that helps you identify with, and have sympathy for others in their pain. The very reason Jesus entered into the pain of human flesh is that He might understand and feel the infirmities of the flesh, and thus, sympathize with our weakness.
2. It teaches humility. Paul was given the pain of the thorn in the flesh because he had such a lofty experience of seeing the third heaven that he could be carried away thinking he was like a god. The pain kept him humble and human.
3. One of the greatest purposes of pain is the power it generates in men to triumph over it. Most of the great victories over pain have come because pain moved its victims to seek a way to help others escape it.

Jesus suffered the pain of the cross for the ultimate goal of ridding the world of all pain. There will be a painless paradise just because of the pain He suffered, and he suffered it because He could not love man and let him go on enduring all the pain that sin had brought into the world. When He walked this earth, almost all of His miracles were pain-killers. He came to destroy the works of the devil that brought so much pain to man, and He did so by healing, forgiving, and by raising from the dead. Ever since the mind of Christ has influenced history, and millions have given their life to fight pain. It is the task of the church, the medical profession, and even the government to fight pain. Every victory over pain is a foretaste of heaven.

See the wretch, that long has toss'd
On the thorny bed of pain,
At length repair his vigour lost,
And breath and walk again!
The meanest flow'ret of the vale,
The simplest note that swells the gale,
The common sun, the air, the skies,
To him are opening Paradise. Author unknown

A major portion of all human energy and human resources are directed at relieving pain, and a large portion of our prayers as Christians are for this very thing as well. The poet prays:

Dear Lord, for all in pain
We pray to Thee;
O come and smite again
Thy enemy.

Give to thy servants skill
To soothe and bless,
And to the tired and ill
Give quietness.

And, Lord, to those who know
Pain may not cease,
Come near, that even so
They may have peace. Author unknown

The paradox is, it is because pain is so terrible that it moves people to such wonderful acts of love and service to conquer it. The very evil of it is the source of so much good. Almost all of the good things we treasure about civilization would not exist if there was no pain to conquer. The result is, pain is a necessary evil in this life, and we must both hate it and love it, fight it and be thankful for it. In heaven we will not have this paradox, for it will be gone and good riddance, but in this life we can not escape the paradox of pain, and the ambivalence of loving and hating it.

The poet captures this paradox:

The cry of man's anguish went up unto God,
"Lord, take away pain!
The shadow that darkens the world Thou hast made;
The close-coiling chain
That strangles the heart; the burden that weighs
On wings that would soar-
Lord, take away pain from the world Thou hast made,
That it love Thee the more.

Then answered the Lord to the cry of His world:
"Shall I take away pain,
And with it the power of the soul to endure,
Made strong by the strain?
Shall I take away pity that knits heart to heart,
And sacrifice high?
Will ye lose all your heroes that lift from the fire
White brows to the sky?
Shall I take away love that redeems with a price,
And smiles at its loss?

Can ye spare from your lives that would climb unto mine
The Christ on His cross?" Author unknown

Pain is so much like the opposite sex: You can't live with it and you can't live without it. It is a pain that it is so, but it is so. The presence of pain in time is as necessary as its absence is essential to heaven. There are some extreme views of pain. We will look at several of them.

1. There are those who say pain is good, and it is always good. It is warning system that tells us that something is wrong so we will get it fixed. This is true, but there are many cases that the pain is severe and hinders the healing process. It breaks the spirit and robs people of hope and in no way is of value. If pain did not have an evil side to it, there would be no pleasure in seeing it will be eliminated from heaven.

Nothing good will be denied the saints in heaven, and so pain is not good in itself. It is a relative good in measure because of the nature of the present world and our fallenness. As soon as it goes beyond a proper measure we do all we can to eliminate it. The whole medical profession exists to fight pain. Amy Charmichael, author of many beautiful poems, went through a very painful experience and she wrote, "Never before had I realized how much concentrated anguish a few square inches of flesh could contain." She went on to write, "The ministry of doctors and nurses appeared to me more than ever before as a divine thing then, and I felt that our Lord Jesus, beholding them, must love them, and greatly desire to work together with them, laying his hand upon theirs as they work..."

The goal is to eliminate pain. It can be used for good, but in itself it is evil and the thing to get rid of. We do not want to deny the many values of moderate pain. Lucy, a Canadian, was born with no sense of pain, and as the result she was in constant danger. She is mass of scars and bruises. She has several severe burns because she could not feel her flesh burning. Very few people have this curse of feeling no pain, but it is just that—a curse. It is good to feel pain. Lepers lose their fingers because they do not feel pain, and they wear them off. It is our sensitivity to pain that keeps us from many injuries to our body every day. We cannot deny the value of moderate pain, but it is blindness to reality to think all pain falls into this category. Milton saw reality and wrote, "But pain is perfect misery, the worst of evils, and, excessive, overturns all patience." To think otherwise would lead to the conclusion that torture was good.

2. There are those who say pain is not real, but it is all in our heads, and we are deceived by the forces of darkness to believe in pain. It is surprising how many people believe this and call pain an illusion. This is a difficult position to hold when confronted with the reality of pain.

There once was a faith healer of Deal
Who said although pain isn't real,
When I sit on a pin
And it punctures my skin
I dislike what I fancy I feel.

For the majority of people this is an unrealistic view of pain.

3. Hindus and Christian Science say that pain is an illusion. They spend their mental energy in

denial of the reality of pain, and it is about as futile as the unrealistic efforts of the man in the old joke. Three men were arrested in Russia, and before they knew it they were in front of a firing squad. A blindfold was given to the first two and they eagerly put them on. But the third man refused his. His comrade at his side whispered, "Take the blindfold Manny, don't make trouble." When you are being shot it is too late to avoid trouble, and when you are hurting it is too late to pretend pain is an illusion.

Whether you ever sing it or say it, everybody at some point feels it: Rain rain go away come again another day. Rain is good and essential, but when it rains on our parade we feel cheated and offended. It is a good thing at the wrong time. Rain so seldom seems convenient, and so rain is often a pain, but a necessary one, and life is full of just such paradoxical pains.

Learning is good but often painful. Even Jesus learned obedience by the things he suffered. It was a painful experience to be tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin. It was painful to be despised and rejected of men. It was painful to do good, and be judged evil. It was painful to give and get no return of thanks. It was painful to be misunderstood, and to be forsaken by those who cared for you. The life of Jesus was pain filled, but it was for the joy that was set before Him that He endured it all—even the pain of the cross. It was worth it all because He knew the end result was a painless eternity where not a pinprick of pain would ever rob His bride of one second of joyous bliss.

All the heroes of the Bible are heroes because they overcame pain and pressed on to joy. Joseph got to the throne where he saved people by the thousands, but the road was rough through the pit, the prison, and the persecution. This is the road that many must travel. Mary Verghese, a young medical doctor of India, was severely crippled in a car accident. She suffered through one operation after another with almost unbearable pain. At first she gritted her teeth and endured the pain. Gradually, however, she came to the conclusion that she could do better than that. With God's help she could use the pain to make her a better doctor. From her wheelchair Mary operated on hands crippled by leprosy.

Now she had a deeper understanding of her patience. She had not only learned to endure pain, she had also learned to use it for the benefit of fellow sufferers and the glory of God. "I did not understand depressed people when I was busy, happy and enjoying life. Not until I walked through a dark valley of depression myself was I able to understand people and lend them a sympathetic ear and hand." Out of her pain came the pleasure of serving and being caring. Pain and pleasure are not always foes, but are friends. That is why we risk the potential of pain, for it is often necessary for pleasure.

Charles Allen tells of his love for roller skating. When his children grew up he bought them skates so they could enjoy what he did. They fell and got hurt and cried, but he did not feel guilty for causing his children this pain, for it was worth it for the family pleasure they would enjoy together. Every pleasure carries with it the risk of pain. The joy of victory is in every sport, but so is the agony of defeat. The class yell in the school of experience is Ouch! It is painful and costly even to have fun in this world. Art is painful too. Michaelangelo had to suffer many years of pain and misery that millions might get pleasure from his sculptures and paintings.

If you enjoy a good book, it is because an author went through the enormous pain of creativity,

and the practical pains of work and negotiation. Pleasures are not pain free in this life: They are often purchased by pain. Pain was the price paid for our perpetual pleasure. The cross was the paradoxical pursuit of pleasure by means of pain, and by it Jesus purchased for us a painless forever. Next we see-

II. THE PASSING OF PAIN.

Whatever the values of pain in this life, they are no longer needed in the life to come, for life will be at its best and without pain. That means no aspirin, no pain killers will be in the New Jerusalem. There will be no pharmacy at all, for medicine will be obsolete where there is no sickness or pain. The new resurrected body does not need any warning system, for nothing can ever go wrong. It will be pleasure without pain just as God promised, pleasure at his right hand forevermore.

If pain were allowed in heaven, it would make it hell, for the higher a being climbs in sensitivity the greater the pain. Animals suffer more than plants, and people more than animals, and people who rise in their sensitivity suffer more than those who are dull. The ear that is trained to listen to good music is offended by discord more than the uncultivated ear. The eye trained to see beauty is irritated more by an ugly scene than those who are partially blind to its ugliness. As life advances in quality it is more easily wounded by lack of quality. This means that in our perfected state it would be torture to have to endure what we do in this fallen world with all of its imperfections. God has promised us an environment to fit our new and perfected nature. There will be nothing in heaven to cause physical, mental, or spiritual pain.

Howard Thurman tells of visiting with a friend when they heard the baby cry. It became quite intense and so they went to see. The child had thrown off the covers and had his big toe in his mouth and was chewing on it. The pain he was inflicting on his own body made him cry. He did not know he was causing his own pain, and often this is the case all through life. We suffer because of foolish things we do to ourselves, and we don't even know it. This will never happen in heaven, for with pain, all that causes pain will also have to go. All the negative realities that make this a fallen world will be gone.

Robert Ingersall, the famous skeptic, once said, "If I were God, I would make health contagious and not disease. I would see to it that laughter was infectious and not sadness." God has revealed that to be precisely what He intends to do in the new heaven and earth. The only reason it is not true on this earth is because of man and his foolish choice to disobey God. All pain has been brought on himself. But in the new heaven and earth the possibility of sin and disobedience is gone. There will never be a time when God has to discipline one of his children and cause pain. There is a lot of this in time, but never again in eternity. The whole purpose of the good pain of time, like the cross, was to secure a life where no pain is necessary to achieve God's purpose and experience His best.

There will be many in heaven who suffered tribulation on earth, and many who were martyred, and many who just had a poorly put together body that suffered a lot. Catherine Booth, the mother of The Salvation Army, was in pain most of her life. She had tuberculosis and curvature of the spine. She said she could not recollect one single day when she was free from pain. Yet she used that pain-filled body to touch our world for Christ. She will enjoy the fruit of her painful sacrifice for all eternity. The point is, it is worth suffering to do the will of God, for as Paul says in Rom. 8:18, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be

revealed in us." Paul's hope of a painless eternity helped him cope with the pain of time.

The health and wealth gospel is just too much too soon. Those who preach that God wants us all in perfect health and blest with abundance are right, but they are ahead of their time. We have to live in a fallen world until we get to heaven, and in a fallen world nobody escapes the present sufferings. No matter how healthy or wealthy you are, you are not yet in heaven, and you will have pain of one kind or another.

A military plane crashed at an Airforce base in Greenland killing 22 people. It was a grizzly sight with body strewn over the runway and field. Each body had to be identified, and it was a long gruesome task. It was after midnight before they were done. The base chaplain said that even at this late hour someone was knocking at his door. It was a young Lieutenant who had helped him with the task. He said nothing, but just stood there and began to weep. The chaplain could not control himself, and he broke into tears as well. They stood with their arms around each others weeping. Edward Beckstrom, the chaplain, writes this of what then happened.

After some moments, the lieutenant finally spoke through his tears."I realized," he said, "As we were picking up pieces of bodies today, that the only other people out there with us were the people who go to church here. I've always been an unbeliever, and I use to ridicule these same people who were out there with us. Yet they are the only ones who would, or perhaps could, do what we had to do today. It must have been a great act of faith that could help them see beyond the gore-to a hope."

That tragic day turned around the life that young lieutenant. As he readily admitted, he had never been religious, had seldom gone to church except for weddings or funerals, but from that time on he was a new man. He took an active part in the Christian ministry of that base. He began attending church regularly, singing in the choir, and becoming totally involved.

The point is, those who have hope of a painless paradise can better cope with this world of pain, and offer to a lost world the Gospel of hope in Jesus Christ. Escape from pain and enjoyment of pleasure is what drives all people, and we have the ultimate drive in Jesus. Let this hope affect how you cope with pain, and let it motivate you to want others to be in on this greatest news in history-a pain free paradise.

15. THE JOY OF HEAVEN

Two friends were walking along a country road and precisely at the same moment that one saw a lovely wild flower the other spotted a poisonous snake. When the one had killed the snake and the other had put the flower in his button hole, they walked on in silence for a while, and then the one with the flower said, "I wonder which one of us is a realist." The other man thought for a moment, and then replied, "I suppose I must admit the flower is as real as the snake." The study of heaven is

an emphasis on that very point--the flower is as real as the snake.

There is a popular philosophy aboard that makes people believe they are only being realistic when they face up to the fact of evil. Snakes are real and only the foolish who want to escape reality deny their existence. But this kind of thinking leads to the promoting of evil under the guise of realism. A realistic love story, to the world, demands some immorality, for immorality is real. Swearing is popular on TV because real people do swear, and so to be realistic we must hear it on TV. Real people today do everything that real people did in ancient Sodom and Gomorrah, and since modern people want to be realistic they argue that it not only should be done, but it should be promoted in movies, music, and literature in order to make our art and culture realistic.

The Christian can have no quarrel with the desire to be realistic, but he does have to disagree with those who limit the real to the negative. The flower is just as real as the snake. You do not have to pour forth the poison of hell to be realistic, for the pure and pleasant springs of heaven are just as real. Those whose vision of the real is so narrow and limited that they must promote what is evil to be realistic are extremely unrealistic, for true realism takes in the whole picture of reality. True realism recognizes that evil is real, but also that it is only a temporal reality, and that it is a reality that has come into existence and will one day cease to exist. The good and the true and the beautiful, however, are the eternal aspects of reality that will never pass away, but will, in fact, be forever increasing when evil has ceased to exist. Sorrow is real, but joy is real forever. The true realist devotes himself to that reality which lasts.

The Christian is one, who, because he has set his affections on things above, knows which aspects of reality on which to focus his attention. What one sees as reality all depends on which direction he looks. The poet wrote,

Two men looked out of prison bars
One saw mud, the other stars.

The study of heaven is to help us focus our attention in an upward direction so that no matter how real the mud is, the stars are the reality that we emphasize. Hell is real but heaven must be more real to the believer, for the flower is just as real as the snake.

So often heaven is not real to the believer because they get so bogged down in the realities of this passing life, and they neglect to study the permanent life to come. Cults tend to emphasize heaven and the glory ahead. They produce beautiful books and films of spectacular color on the Holy City to be shown in homes. The Mormons are forever writing and preaching on the glories of heaven. Most offshoots of the main stream of the church use heaven for major appeal. Leaders of cults have to know what appeals to human nature if they hope to succeed in gaining a following. They have learned that the hope of heaven is a universal hope, and so they capitalize on it, while the Orthodox Church often neglects it and loses out as a result.

The hope of heaven is a hope that God built into the heart of man. The ancient Egyptians had an elaborate theology concerning the afterlife. Others had no details, but they believed in heaven. Livingstone, in his travels in Africa, had one of the tribesmen tell him: "We live only a few days here, but we live again after death; we do not know where, or in what condition, or with what companions, for the dead never return to tell us." Some such hope as this is the hope of men in every nation, and when there is such an instinct written into the very nature of man, you can be sure there is

a reality corresponding to the desire.

Birds have an instinct that tells them there is a warmer climate in the south even if they have never been there, and when they obey that instinct they reach the fulfillment of their desire. All instincts and desires have a reality to fulfill them, and so it is with the human desire for a life after death. Man has an instinct for immortality. Goethe said, "It is, to a thinking being, quite impossible to think himself non-existent." Franken said, "The demand for self-preservation is one of our most powerful instincts; it transcends the tomb itself, for the desire for immortality is nothing else than one form of the search for self-preservation." Dr. Beibitz says the universal belief in survival, and the craving for a future in which righteousness will be vindicated is as truly a part of the structure of the universe as is the fact of death itself. In other words, the flowers is as real as the snake.

The director of a play was not satisfied with the leading man in the death scene. "Come on" he pleaded, "You've got to put more life into it." It may sound paradoxical, but that is exactly what Christians should do. They must put more life into dying. Dying was so exciting to Paul that he didn't know what he wanted most. Should he die and be with Christ, which was really so much better, or live and help others gain this same hope. Paul, of course, had an advantage over us, for he had been caught up into heaven and had a preview of life to come. The Scriptures give us enough of an idea of what to expect, however, so that we too should be able to face death with anticipation.

Unfortunately, many Christians have a drab and distorted view of heaven. Lloyd George once made this confession that probably describes the feelings of many: "When I was boy, the thought of heaven used to frighten me more than the thought of hell. I pictured heaven as a place where time would be perpetual Sunday, with perpetual services from which there would be no escape. It was a horrible nightmare and made me an atheist for ten years." People who love life and have a creative spirit are just not interested in a church service that lasts forever. Endless rest, to many, means endless boredom. It is important, therefore, that the appealing realities of heaven be expounded so that people will be excited about eternal life, and, therefore, be willing to yield their lives to Christ, who alone is the Way into that land of everlasting abundant life. We need to see that life does not become more narrow in eternity, but rather it is expanded--

"And every power finds sweet employ
In that eternal world of joy."

The Scriptures do emphasize the glorious worship we will offer to God in eternity because of the great joy that will be ours, and the everlasting gratitude we will have for the Lamb of God, who died for us. This is not to be neglected, and no Christian would want to when it is rightly understood, but we ought not to neglect the other promises that appeal to our human hopes for fulfillment and satisfaction. It can safely be said that in eternity God will grant His children every desire of their perfected hearts. In Rom. 8:32 Paul says, "He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, will He not also give us all things with Him?" God gave us His Son, and He will not deny us anything that is secondary. If you have given your best, you do not hesitate to give less.

Does this mean that God intends to spoil us rotten in heaven, like an over-indulgent father? Yes, and no. Yes, He intends to grant us every desire, but no will not spoil us, for our desires will all be Christlike and conformed to His will. We will desire nothing harmful or sinful, for sin will be

more. God will grant us the desire of His children's hearts, and because His children represent a great variety of people and personalities, it means heaven will be filled with infinite variety. One of the reasons there are few details of heaven is lest some conclude that is all there is. The Bible keeps general on purpose, for what appeals to you may not appeal to me, and vice versa. The general statements leave it open for each to dream and speculate according to their own interest. But listen to the preciousness of the general promise. Paul in Eph. 2:7 says, "That in the coming ages He might show the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus." Paul is saying that for all eternity God is going to show those who trust His Son just how kind He can be. That is all anyone needs to know about heaven to make it the most exciting source of joy.

This means if you are a Christian who is weary of life and all of its battles have worn you out, heaven will be rest to you. This is a valid hope of the battle worn believer. But what of a Christian who has been forced to lie on a bed of illness for years? They are sick of rest. They want to serve, so their hope of heaven is that it will be a place of active service. Martha Snell Nicholson expresses this hope in poetry:

"I do not think of heaven as a place or rest,
Where I may lay my weary head upon thy breast.
So many hours I spend on earth with folded hands,
With tortured nerves, and body gripped with iron bands.
And only faulty service now I give to thee;
So Lord, my dream of heaven is that it will be
A place where I shall stand erect, and straight and strong;
With feet that run to do thy will the whole day long;
And joyous strength for tasks which thou wilt set for me;
A spirit strangely, wondrously, like thee, like thee.
As love for thee, perfected, burns a living flame,
Let this be heaven, Lord, I ask in thy dear name!"

Can anyone look at this prayer in the light of God's promise and doubt that it will be answered? Her joy will be full, and so also the joy of those who long for rest. Let us leave the joy of heaven as open as the Scriptures do, so that it covers the case of every child of God. There is no place for narrow and limited joy in the plan of God. Let the Mohammedan have his heaven of wine, women, and song, and let the Buddhist have his eternity of the peace of nothingness, but the Christian will build his hope on the heaven of infinite variety worthy of the God of the Bible. The joy of heaven is that there will be, not only something for everyone, but that there will be everything for everyone.

The glories and joys of heaven are kept general because of the infinite variety that will come from the kindness of God. On the other hand, the Bible is very specific in telling us what will not be heaven, and by so doing leaves the door open for us to speculate on the unimaginable joys that must characterize life without these negatives.

For example, death shall be no more. If that is not cause for joy, what is? The New Jerusalem will be a city without a cemetery. This means there will be the vigor and strength of perpetual youth. There will not only be a great increase in our powers, there will never be any set backs, loses or decays. Progress in heaven will be perpetual. No value gained, and no relationship developed will ever be lost. We will eventually know everyone in heaven by name. Not only will people be blessed by the absence of death, but so will all creation, for none of the beauty of it will ever decay. Winter will be gone forever.

Beyond these chilling winds and gloomy skies,
Beyond death's cloudy portal-
There is a land where beauty never dies,
And love becomes immortal.

If you can plant a flower in heaven or the new earth you will have its beauty forever, for death cannot touch it. The joy of heaven will be everything lasts. Every gain is a permanent gain. The last enemy to be destroyed is death says Paul, and when this is accomplished all of God's children will be--out of the shadow into the sun, the battle fought, the victory won.

It was the joy of eternity without sin and death that enabled Jesus to press on to the cross and die for our sin. Heb. 12:2 says, "Looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God." It is obvious that the joy that Jesus saw was not merely His own, for He could have returned to the glory of heaven without going to the cross. It was the joy of redeemed people with Him for all eternity that compelled Him to endure the cross. Jesus said in Himself--the joys of heaven for all of the redeemed are so great that I cannot refuse to bear their sin and endure their hell that they might enter into the eternal kingdom. He said it is worth the cross to make this eternal joy possible.

This certainly explains why all the inhabitants of heaven will sing praises to the Lamb of God. The cross will be one symbol that will be relevant for all eternity. The love of Christ for us expressed on Calvary cannot be comprehended. We will never fully understand this love until we enter into the full experience of salvation in heaven. The poet feels that even then it may be beyond expression-

"O for this love let rocks and hills there lasting silence break,
And all harmonies human tongues the Savior's praise speak!
Angels, assist our mighty joys strike all your harps of gold!
But when you raise your highest notes, His love can ne'er be told."

Possibly the greatest mystery of eternity will be, why did He love us so? We must assume that the joy of heaven will be so great that Jesus will forever be glad He paid the price for it all.

John tells us in Revelation 21:4 that pain shall be no more. At God's right hand there are pleasures for evermore, but no pain. This too has implications for joy beyond our imagination. This implies there will not be any kind of injury possible in our eternal bodies. No falling on the streets of gold, and this means no one will be too young or too old to be falling. There will be no immaturity or infirmity that can lead to mistakes and accidents. What fools men are to risk eternal pleasure with no guilt or sorrow of any kind for the sake of pleasure that displeases God and leads to all kinds of pain and sorrow.

"there shall we see his face
and never, never sin;
there from the river of his grace,
drink endless pleasure in."

God forbid that we sell this great inheritance for the world's mess of pottage. Do not give up jewels

for junk of diamonds for dust. Let us set our affections on things above where we will see forever that the flower is more real than the snake.

16. THE MOTIVATION OF HEAVEN

In the 15th chapter of Gibbon's *Decline And Fall Of The Roman Empire*, he says that the promise of heavenly bliss was one of the five major causes for the growth of Christianity in the Roman Empire. The leaders of Rome mocked the idea of immortality, and they did not live this life with any hope of a future state. This loss of hope for the future can only lead to decline in the present.

Schwitzer said, "It was as the religion of immortality that Christianity was consecrated to take the place of the slowly dying civilization of the ancient world." History makes it clear that man's hope is the key to life's meaning. If there are no goals and no possibilities out there in the future, it robs life of meaning. Life without hope is like fishing in a vast ocean in which you know there are no fish. It is only the assurance that there are fish that makes fishing meaningful. It is only the assurance of future reward that makes the present life meaningful.

Hope, said Kierkegaard is, "Passion for the possible." Paul says we are actually saved by hope, and this is quite obvious, for without hope there is no salvation. Jesus knew the power of hope, and that is why we see Him using it as the primary motivation for living the Christian life.

In the seven letters to the churches he gives seven promises, and at least five of the seven are promises of reward in the eternal kingdom, and the other two probably do as well. This means the Lord of heaven used the realities of what He has gone to prepare for His bride as the key motivating factor in His guidance of the church. This means Jesus is clearly sold on the hope of reward as a vital aspect of Christian theology. This means that the study of heaven is not just an idle pastime to satisfy curiosity. It is, in fact, an act of obedience to our Lord. Not to study heaven and all it offers is to reject the heart of our Lord's Christian education system for the church. The hope of heaven is that heart.

E.M. Bounds, famous for his book on prayer, says this about heaven: "Heaven nourishes all the principles of a deep, conscious piety. The Christian never works so well, never suffers so well, never grows so well, as when heaven is in full view of his eyes. It is that which gives to hope its ripeness, richness and power. Only the saint who is after heaven with all the ardor and brightness of hope is truly saved. Doubt and fear flee away from such a salvation." By being truly saved I am sure he means these are the Christians who feel the full impact of the joy of salvation.

Dr. Ross H. Stover, a pastor in Philadelphia, who for many years led the largest midweek service in the U. S., wrote in his book, *What Do We Know About Life After Death*, "It would certainly seem natural that we should be searching the Word of God for every thought expressed on the subject. If builders were erecting a home for me in California, I would look for a letter every day, desiring to know just how the building was proceeding. If a temporal home should cause me delightful meditation, how much more my eternal home. Friends do we not sin against God and ourselves by passing over this subject so lightly?"

The deeper our commitment to follow Christ, the deeper will be our curiosity about the rewards for doing so. Some feel it is not right to focus on rewards. We should serve Christ now, and take one world at a time. This sounds noble, but the fact is, it is our hope that gives us motivation in time. The world to come has a powerful effect on the world at hand. The New Testament reveals that Jesus clearly encouraged His followers to focus on reward. Peter once came to Jesus and said, "Lo, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus did not scold him but said, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brother or sister or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the Gospel who will not receive a hundred fold now and in this time...and in the age to come eternal life."

If you think it is wrong to be concerned about rewards, then you rebuke your Lord, for He responded to that concern frequently, and very positively. It is not wrong to be curious about heaven, it is wrong not to be curious. Many Christians have been deceived by the Subtle One into thinking there is something selfish about a probing into heaven and its rewards. They feel it is too self-seeking, and, thus, not very spiritual. We should serve God with disinterested love, and thus be indifferent to our own rewards. This sounds so super spiritual and noble that it convinces many to be the ideal way of thinking.

It has this fatal flaw, however, in that it demands that we be indifferent to the very things that our Lord holds forth as His will for us. How can it be the ideal to ignore the Lord's promise, and strive to live without the motivation He offers the church for overcoming the appeals of this world? It is clearly a satanic trick to feel it is spiritual to ignore Christ's motivation. It is our Lord's will that we filled with the hope of heaven, and that this hope would be the inner power that makes us overcomers in this world.

When the 70 returned to Jesus so excited about their mission, because they saw such great response, and even demons being subject to them in His name, Jesus said He had given them power over the enemy, but then He adds this in Luke 10:20, "Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." In other words, Jesus says our joy in Christian service can get in our way of seeing the ultimate joy--the joy of eternity. It is possible to get so wrapped up in Christian service that one misses the highest motivation that Jesus offers His disciples.

The great soul winners of history were also great students of heaven. John R. Rice, one of the great soul--winners of our century, wrote, "Many times I have found that hearts have grown tender as they find the sweet provision God has made in heaven for those who will put their trust in Him. The message of heaven is a soul--winning message."

B.H. Carroll, the late president of South Western Baptist Theological Seminary once wrote, "I delight to preach on heaven. There is tremendous power over the mind and the heart in it. Once when I was preaching at Belton, not getting results, I went out and prayed three times that God might make me realize the nearness and certainty of both heaven and hell. When I got that in my mind and heart revival broke out, heaven came down and we were in the glory of the mercy seat."

We could go on and on, for the testimonies are endless of the practical values of heaven in all realms of Christian service. I know from personal experience. I preached on the glory of heaven at the mission, and got the best response ever as men came forward to receive Christ. What this means

is we must avoid the flower life, which rises from the earth and returns to the earth. It is to earth centered. But we must also avoid the star life, which is to remote with only a slight effect upon earth. The ideal symbol of the Christian life is the rainbow life. It has both ends resting on earth, but it rises into the heavens so that there is a linking of the two. The Christian is to be attuned to the heavenly, but also involved in the earthly.

Seeing what God has promised is what motivates us to tackle our earthly tasks with greater meaning and enthusiasm. Our heavenly hope takes the poison out of many of life's sorrows, and it enables us to see meaning what otherwise can be trivial. Robert Coyle wrote, "All history shows that if men do not first look up they will not look out; if they do not look ahead into the great tomorrow, they will grow hard and cynical and careless as to the people who are around them today. God save us from a world untouched, uncleaned, and uninspired by the influence of a future life."

Yes we only know in part, and we see through a glass darkly, but the point is, it is in part we know, and it is though darkly, we see. We can know and see all that is necessary for us to live the present life with victory, if we take full advantage of what God has revealed. On an earthly level we see the power of hope and anticipation. If you know you have an exciting vacation coming, it can enable you to handle pressure in a calmer way. A child knowing it will soon get to go to Disney Land will find it easier to obey rules and regulations of the family. The hope and anticipation of joy and just plain fun has great enabling power even on the earthly level. How much greater is the power of heavenly hope to enable us to endure the negatives of a fallen world? Paul says if in this life only we have hope in Christ we are of all men most miserable. In other words, without heavenly hope the Christian is less able to handle life than the non-believer, for his life is then not only meaningless but miserable.

In Col. 1 Paul thanks God for their faith in Christ and for the love they have for all the saints, "Because of the hope laid up for you in heaven." Paul is saying the love we have for one another on earth is directly connected with our hope of heaven. Heavenly love on earth is based on heavenly hope. If you look at people only from the perspective of time, you are not necessarily motivated to love them. If I am traveling and stop at a gas station to buy a pack of gum, I am not really interested in developing a relationship with the guy behind the counter. I am moving on and he will never be a part of my life, and so that makes a difference in how I see that person in terms of value. If, however, I am moving into that community and could have a relationship to him, that makes him of greater value in my future, and changes how I see him and relate to him.

If we see others in the light of our heavenly hope, it enables us to love them in a way it is not possible without that hope. If we will be with each other forever in the Father's house, then we must move all the saints from that perspective. I may not like how certain Christians worship, or how they serve, but if they love Christ I have an obligation to love them, for they are part of the eternal family. The hope of heaven is very practical in that it is the key to overcoming all of the prejudices that hinder Christian fellowship in the world.

Show me the Christian who is full of prejudice and bigotry, and I'll show you a Christian who is earth-locked, and unable to see the heavenly hope. The result is, he lacks the motivation to be what God wants him to be. The motivating power to be Christ-like in time is found in grasping what Christ has promised for eternity. Only to the degree that we are captivated by his heavenly reward can we be successful in living now in obedience to His commands.

The Christian not motivated by the heavenly hope will soon be a worldly Christian, for he will not be able to pull away from the value system of the world, since he has no higher value system that makes it look shabby in comparison. Naturalists tell us our domestic fowls were once birds with long wings able to fly great distances. But food placed by man in easy reach made it no longer necessary to take long flights. They lost their motivation to fly, and settled down to what they had. The Christian who stops anticipating heaven, and ceases to be motivated by all that God has promised, and all Christ has prepared, is also in danger of just settling down and being content with what this world offers. May God help us, in this sense, to never lose our wings, by making sure we are a people who focus on the motivation of heaven.

17. NO COWARDS IN HEAVEN Based on Rev. 21:7-8

On January 18, 1912 Captain Robert F. Scott and four companions at last reached the South Pole only to discover that they had been beaten by another explorer named Amundsen. It was a terrible disappointment, for they had gone through unbelievable hardships to get there. The return journey was even worse. The blizzards were so bad, and the cold so bitter, they made little progress. This led to their running out of food, and you can imagine the rest. Ten months later rescuers found their bodies and Captain Scott's diary. One of the last things he wrote with his cold and weakened hand was this: "I do not regret this journey...We took risks, we knew we took them; things have come out against us, and therefore we have no cause for complaint, but bow to the will of Providence, determined still to do our best to the last."

Here were men who died heroes because they were willing to take risks to reach their goal. No man can ever be truly successful without taking risks. One must risk the possibility of failure in order to succeed. No ball player ever stole second without risking being thrown out. Progress and advancement on every level of living demands risk taking courage. Those who always play it safe are never the heroes in the battle of life. In fact, some studies indicate that they live in greater danger than the risk-takers.

Dr. E. Paul Torrence, a university of Georgia psychologist, studied U. S. Ace Flyers during World War II. He discovered that the ace flyers who took all kinds of risks actually suffered fewer casualties in combat than the pilots who were inclined to play it safe. He discovered that the risk takers kept testing the limits of their abilities and, therefore, kept growing and learning new skills. The more cautious stop short of their best and were sunk in a crisis beyond their experience. Playing it safe led to their defeat. Dr. Torrence said, "Living itself is a risky business. If we spent half as much time learning how to take risks as we spend avoiding them, we wouldn't have nearly so much to fear in life."

Some of you may be wondering, what does this have to do with heaven? That is certainly one goal we can arrive at without any risk. Jesus already paid the price did He not? If He is our Savior then we have the hope of heaven guaranteed. Certainly no one has to be a hero to get to heaven. At least this is the common understanding among Christians. But I wonder if we do not take too much for granted. The black Christians back in the days of slavery use to sit around their humble dwellings on the plantation and sing, "When I get up to heaven I'm gonna put on my shoes, I'm

gonna walk all over God's heaven." Then they would look up to the mansion and sing, "Everybody talkin bout heaven aint goin there."

They had their conviction about who was not going to make it. The Apostle John had his convictions also, and he tells us by revelation just who isn't goin there. The amazing thing is that the very first kind of person he lists as being excluded from heaven is the one who plays it safe and fears to take a risk. John says in verse 8 that the fearful, or the cowardly as the Greek means, will be the first to be cast into the lake of fire. In verse 7 he says that it is the over-comer, or the conqueror who shall inherit heaven. There is no way to escape the truth of what John is saying. The principle of success through risk taking is not just for earthly goals, but for all goals, even including the goal of heaven.

Heaven is for heroes only, so there will be no cowards in heaven. All cowards will be cast into the lake of fire which is the second and final death. They played it safe and took no risks for Christ, and like all safety first people, they end up as total failures. Think of Pilate for example. He was so merciful until it became to risky. He wanted to do what was right, but when setting Christ free threatened to cost him his position of power he turned coward and sent Christ to the cross. He had the chance to be one of the greatest heroes of the New Testament, but he played it safe, and lost the key to heaven's door. All he will see of heaven is the sign saying, no cowards allowed. How many others will there be who drew back from the challenge to take up the cross, and who will lament with the poet who wrote:

"I dreamed of a faith for heroes, But a hero I refuse to be.
I fell back from the cross. Such faith would cost.
The risk was too much for me!
Now, the years are gone, And I have come to see
That the risk I shunned Is the risk that made of someone
The hero I had wanted to be." Author unknown

Pilate's type of fear is a good example to illustrate what John is saying here, for not all fear excludes from heaven. The foundations of the Holy City have on them the names of 12 men who were fearful on more than one occasion. The same word that John uses here was used by Jesus when He asked His disciples why they were so fearful when the storm threatened to sink their boat. Fear of storms and drowning is not the kind of fear that excludes from heaven. We can dismiss all the fears of life that make us cowards before the manifold enemies of our peace and tranquility.

The cowardice that excludes from heaven is the cowardice that refuses to take the risk involved in being identified with Christ. It was dangerous to be a Christian when John wrote this book. Christians were being martyred constantly. You didn't raise your hand; go forward, and live happily ever after. Your stand for Christ was often the signing of your death warrant. You risk your business, your home, your family, and everything, when the Romans began to persecute Christians.

Masses of people who professed to be Christians in times of peace and safety denied Christ and forsook the church when it involved risk. All they wanted was a religion that promised them good things. They wanted fire insurance to keep them out of the flames of hell, but they were not going to burn at the stake to collect it benefits. They refuse to pay the premium of risk, and, therefore, their

insurance is cancelled says John, and the lake of fire is their destiny. "He who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is not fit for the kingdom," said Jesus. The coward who forsakes Christ when the heat is on literally leaps out of the frying pan into the fire.

The language of revelation is strong and frightening because it is addressed to those in the midst of great spiritual warfare. The commander does not say to his troops as they face the enemy attack: "Any of you guys who cannot take it, just fall back and trucks will be ready to take you off the field of battle." No! He says, "I'll shoot the first man who turns his back to the enemy." Rough words, and seemingly cruel, but there is no alternative if the battle is to be won. So it is in the Christian battle. No person should ever become a Christian with the idea in mind that Christians receive special permission to cop out of life's battles. Jesus says, "Take up the cross and follow me." Paul says, "Put on the whole armor of God." No where do we read that Christians are free to go AWOL because Jesus paid it all.

The completed work of Christ is what assures us of victory even if we fall in the battle, but it does not remove us from the battle. The cross does not relieve us of our duty to fight against the forces of evil. An article in Christianity Today suggested that one of the reasons youth are rejecting the church today is because the heroes of today are not coming from the church. The dangerous business of fighting the forces of evil is being done by non-Christians, or people not connected with the church. Christians are taking no risks and are not involved where they might get hurt. In the words of Dr. Harpur, youth know "...that the average church goer blends into the background of suburban conformist society as neatly as a snowshoe rabbit in a drift in January."

Does this mean the average church goer is cowardly and faces exclusion from heaven? I'm not sure what it means, but I know Jesus said that if we are ashamed of Him before men, He will be ashamed of us before His Father in heaven. Anyway you look at it cowardice is going to cost plenty in the long run. No wonder Paul was so concerned about being bold for Christ. He asked for prayer that he might be bold in his preaching of the Gospel. He was not an automatic hero. He had to fight off the fears of the flesh like every hero.

Arthur Koestler said, "Courage is never to let your actions be influenced by your fears." Paul had the fears of the flesh like any man, but he acted on faith and not fear. His faith led him to risk everything for Christ, and the result was he had absolute assurance of receiving the crown of righteousness, for he fought a good fight. Paul also writes, however, of those who make shipwreck of the faith. They do it, not because they commit themselves to battle the storms, but because they try and play it safe.

John Logemann told of how he and his wife were invited to take a cruise in the Caribbean with some friends in their cabin sailboat. On the second day out they ran into heavy seas and learned that a tropical storm had developed just ahead of them. They turned back, and with auxiliary engines running full speed they raced for their home port. They were within a mile of the entrance to their harbor's shelter and safely when the storm caught them. Thank heavens we're almost there Logemann thought to himself, but then to his astonishment the skipper turned the boat around and headed into the center of the storm. Logemann could not control his fear and began to protest. "Sure its risky," yelled his skipper friend, "But its better than breaking up on those rocks." Hours later when they had ridden out the storm and surried into port, Logemann saw what he meant. Wreckage was everywhere. The harbor was a shambles of boats that had been smashed against the

docks and rocks. The skipper had learned from experience that sometimes you have to take a risk for the sake of safety.

What is true for sailing is true for all of life, and for the hope of eternal life. Heaven is open wide for those who launch out into the deep, but for the fearful and cowardly who hung the shore and take no risk for Christ, there is only a coward's reward. This is certainly what Jesus had in mind when He said, (paraphrase) "If you lose your life for My sake, you shall find it. But for those who save their lives because they play it safe, they shall lose them."

The only way to win in the game of life is to be a risk taker for Christ. It is important that we get this straight that it must be for Christ. Just as fear will not keep us out of heaven, so foolish bravery will not be of any value. If I risk going through a red light at 50 miles per hour, I may get to heaven even sooner than I expected, but it won't be because of my bravery, but rather in spite of my folly. The boldness and courage the Scripture demands is that which leads us to take risks for the name and the glory of Christ. To be a fool for Christ's sake is not to be foolish, but to risk all for Christ so that the world looks upon you as a fool, because to them Christ is not worth the risk.

Frances Schaeffer in his book *The Church At The End Of The 20th Century* hits hard at the Evangelical Christian cowardice in facing the world's needs. Few are willing to be fools for Christ. Compassion is costly, and he tells what it cost him to love sinners. In his world famous retreat called L'abri in Switzerland, known to Evangelicals all over the world, and from which he has written his many best selling books, he opens the door to all. The all includes drunks who vomit on his rugs, and prostitutes and drug addicts who ruin his sheets and burn holes in everything. Blacks and Orientals, and everyone eats at his table.

Why does he risk the dangers and diseases these people can bring? Because he believes this passage of Scripture which says such people will be excluded from heaven unless they can be won to Christ. He knows that only a love that takes risks can ever win them, and he asks, do you really believe that people are going to hell? "We Evangelicals will fight the liberals when they say there is no hell, but we don't want to take the risk of opening our homes to those who are going there, in an effort to rescue them." He is saying that we deny Christ, not verbally, but by failure to do what He desires. We want a risk free faith that costs nothing.

It is obvious that there are many true Christians who fail Jesus at this point. All of us are cowards at some time or another, and are fearful to witness. Certainly not every act of cowardice and fear will keep us out of heaven. The implication of what John says here is that the perpetual coward is just not a true Christian. Christ cannot really dwell in the life of a person who never takes a stand for Christ. No person can truly be born again who does not openly identify himself with Christ at some point. But since such cowardice is a guarantee from heaven, any cowardice and fear of risk taking for Christ by true Christians will certainly also be a basis for loss of reward.

The point is, if God hates cowardice the same as murder and whoremongering, and all the other horrible sins that lead to the lake of fire, then it cannot help but be a curse in anyone's life, and in any degree. What a challenge this becomes for each of us to join Paul in his constant prayer for boldness.

18. THE MOUNTAIN PERSPECTIVE Based on Rev. 21:9-14

Mary Crowley is one of the richest women in America. She is founder and president of the multi-million dollar empire of Home Interiors And Gifts Inc. She was the first woman to sit on the board of directors of the Billy Graham Assoc. In reading her book Think Mink, I discovered she has a retreat center in the mountains of Colorado. She brings all her displays there for training, because her business is helping people make their environment beautiful, and she knows no better way to get her sales people inspired with beauty than to spend some time in the mountains, where God has designed the beauty of the environment.

She has a full length window for them to gaze out on the golden sunrise from 9,000 feet up on the 14,197 foot Mt. Princeton. On the back of her calling card are these words: "Every morning lean thine arm a while upon the window sill of heaven and gaze upon thy God. Then with that vision in thine heart, turn strong to meet the day."

She gets gold from the mountains, but she never digs an ounce. Her gold comes from their inspiration. Listen to the testimony of Dr. N. A. Woychok in his book Building Gold, Silver And Precious Stones. He has always wanted to see the sunrise from Pike's Peak in Colorado.

"We arose at 2:00 A.M. Higher and higher we climbed until the peak was reached, not without dizziness and "fear tremors." Slowly dawn's rosy steps were advancing on the Eastern sky, until the few broken clouds, hanging above the horizon as if purposefully for effect, were gloriously lighted up into a fuchia red against a background of brilliant blue. And then "Old Sol" tipped the horizon and presently came forth ablaze with divine glory, adorned as "a bridegroom coming out of his chamber."

"Standing there on an elevation almost three miles above sea level, we scanned the horizon some one hundred twenty-five miles away and actually looked down upon the sun. I gazed upon this beauty with an indescribable inner exhilaration, as if under the spell of some strange magic. My mind, soul, and spirit feasted sumptuously. The vision inflamed my imagination and became a permanent part of my life, just as much as if some special "tabernacle" had been built to preserve it. It became a thing of beauty whose loveliness increases, and it shall never pass into nothingness."

We only spent four days in the mountains of Colorado, and though we had been there before, they fill you with awe because of their massiveness and majesty. It makes sense why God does so much of His business with men on the mountains. They are a fitting environment for man to confront the majesty of their Creator. God began the new world after the flood on Mount Ararat

where the Ark landed. The second half of Exodus all revolves around Mount Sinai where God gave His law to His people through Moses.

There are dozens of mountain scenes. For example, where Abraham offers up Isaac on Mt. Moriah; where Lot flees to the mountains; where Jacob offered sacrifice on the mountains. Aaron died on Mt. Hor and Moses on Mt. Nebo, and Saul on Mt. Gibbon. Elijah won his great victory over idolatry on Mt. Carmel. In the New Testament Jesus did so many special things on mountains. His most famous sermon is the Sermon On The Mount. On Mt. Tabor He was transfigured. On Mt. Calvary He died for the sins of the world. On the Mt. of Olives He ascended into heaven where He reigns on Mt. Zion, the name of the New Jerusalem, or heaven. We sing about marching upward to Zion the beautiful city of God.

There are hundreds of verses on mountains in the Bible, but we want to focus on the last mountain in the Bible. It is a mountain so high that John could see heaven from it. Rev. 21:10 says, "He carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God." Seeing heaven from a mountain top was the unique experience of the Apostle John. Millions have seen the glory of earth from the mountain, but only John saw the glory of heaven from the mountain. Moses was allowed to see the Promise Land from Mt. Nebo, but only John saw the Eternal Paradise for all God's people from the mountain top. This was the ultimate mountain top experience.

God is saying something to all His people by revealing so much of His will and truth from the mountain top. What He is saying is that our perspective determines our perception, or, in other words, our stand point determines what we see. Why do men and women climb mountains? It is not just because they are there, but because of what they can see from there. Why do men and women blast off into space? It is because they can see the whole world from a unique perspective. They can see how the laws of nature work differently in that weightless environment. Everything looks different from the heights.

Little Zacheaus climbed up a sycamore tree because he could see Jesus from a new perspective, and that climb gave him a glimpse that changed his life forever. Seeing Jesus from a more lofty height is a life-changing perspective. Mountains give us two different perspectives that help us see life differently. When you are high in them, you can look down and see the awesome scene below, and when you are below you can look up and see the awesome scene of their heights. Either way you look, up or down, you can see what cannot be seen the same from any other perspective.

Now this is not entirely true, for if you fly you can get a perspective from the heights that changes everything. I once flew over Pittsburgh in a small plane. On the ground you can drive in that city and be convinced they just put a snake on a piece of paper and let it crawl to plan the roads. But from the plane I could see a pattern and an order that could not be seen from the ground. Everything was different. Out over the country side too every plot of land was uniform and there was order that could never be detected from the ground. You could see the parts in the context of the whole and get a view of reality that was only available from the heights.

The reason God wants His people to climb to greater heights is because they can see what is not visible in the low lands. Isa. 40:31 says, "Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles..." The poet wrote:

"Rise and soar into the sunlit ways,
Using both the wings of prayer
and praise;
Mount like eagles-higher in the
sky,
And you'll find things look so
different when you fly."

This is why people fly and why they climb mountains. They want to see things differently. If you can just get high enough you can see from heaven's perspective, and from that viewpoint you can always be optimistic. Poor John was in exile on the island of Patmos. He was a prisoner and at the mercy of anti-Christ powers. It would be easy to be pessimistic, for the facts were very real, and very gloomy. But God took him to a mountain where he could see the final destination, and he became the world's foremost optimist.

Mountains do this to you. They help you see the potential of the future because of the vast possibilities that still exist. Every time I drive in the mountains I look off into the vast spaces of them and wonder if any human being has ever been there. There has to be millions of square miles where human feet have never been. There is no end it seems to the possible resources not yet discovered. People are going off and finding precious stones all the time. The world is full of treasure that is not yet been found. There is still gold in them thar hills. Out on the prairie it seems almost every inch of the land is accounted for. It is fenced off and planted, and being used for some purpose. But the mountains are filled with endless unused areas, and nobody yet knows their potential.

They make you realize the best gold nugget may not yet have been found. The best gemstones could be in any of those mountains just waiting to be discovered. Mountains give you the perspective of hope, for there is so much yet to be discovered. The mountain view of life makes you realize that the world is still full of opportunities. None of us has yet discovered all the treasure God has for us. We are like mountains. We have gifts not yet discovered, developed, and dedicated to the glory of God.

In a men's Bible study we took a test, and men were discovering they had potential in all sorts of areas where they did not think they did, and would never have said they did. We only scratched the surface, but we learn that there is likely potential gifts in all of us that lie buried like gold and precious gems in the mountains, where no one has ever yet explored.

A mountain perspective on life will make us see ourselves and others as people with hidden potential. Even greatly gifted people do not always have their gifts on their lapel like a name tag. They are hidden and need to be discovered. When Giuseppe Verdi applied to the Conservatory of the Milan to be a student of music the school officials were not impressed with this 18 year old. They rejected the greatest musician who ever applied for entrance to their school. Later, of course, after his successful career they changed the name of their school from the Conservatory of Milan to the Verdi Conservatory. They only saw his gift when it was full blown, and so conspicuous that everyone could see it. The mountain-like perspective would have enabled them to see his potential in his early stages. How do you see people? You get what you see type perspective, or who knows what hidden potential is in this person?

Jesus did not choose His 12 Apostles based on what they were, but based on what they could potentially become. To Him they were like unexplored mountains with unmined caves filled with undiscovered riches. John himself who was seeing heaven from a mountain top was a hot headed son of thunder who wanted to call fire down from heaven to consume those who did not conform to his ideal. Jesus chose this man to be a disciple. This looked like choosing Mt. St. Helens for a children's theme park, but Jesus saw the potential of this hot head, and John became the great Apostle of love.

Jesus was always going up into the mountains to pray. Most all of the references to mountains in the Gospels are of Jesus going there alone, or with a few disciples. Jesus was the main mountain climber of the New Testament. He saw life from a mountain perspective, and he saw people that way as well. He saw their hidden potential to climb far higher than where they were. We are to have the mind of Christ Paul said, and that means a mountain top perspective on life and people.

The best poem has not yet been written.
The best song has not yet been sung.
The best drum has not yet been smitten.
The best bell has not yet been rung.

In a mountainous world the best is always a hidden potential. I was so impressed by Thompson Road Canyon but I drove an hour out of my way to go through it three times. The first time I went through it I was young and had never seen a mountain before. I was so fearful that I could not enjoy it. I had to hold the steering wheel with all my attention focused on the road. This last time I could enjoy the awesome work of God and man. God made the mountains, but man blasted a path through these mountain cliffs and made a road through this solid rock. Only God can make the mountains, but only man would make a road through them.

The combination of the creation of God and the creation of man is a double awesomeness that we see God Himself appreciates, for in this description of the eternal Holy City we have the Revelation in verse 24-"The kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it." And in verse 26, "The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it." All of the marvels of history made by man are not junk to God. He made man in His image with the potential of creating wondrous things, and God will treasure these man made creations forever. Just as parents love to see their children become creative, and they put their works of art on the wall or shelf for display, so God will decorate the eternal city with the glorious works of men.

If you never travel to all the wonders of the world of man's creativity, do not feel bad, for you will see them all in the New Jerusalem. Anything worth seeing will be a part of the enjoyment of our eternal environment. The golden age is not behind us, but ahead in that golden city John saw from the mountain top. Sometimes Christians get pessimistic and wonder what the future holds. What will it be like for their children and grandchildren? If you see life from the mountain perspective you can say amen to the poet who wrote:

"Mourn not for the vanquished ages
With their great historic men,
Who dealt in history's pages,
And live in the poetic pen.

For the greatest days are before us,
And the world is yet to see
The noblest work of this whole earth
Is the men and women that are to be."

The mountain perspective makes you optimistic about God, and about what He can do in an with your life. After you drive through Iowa, South Dakota, and Nebraska on the interstate you have forgotten that God is a master artist, for even a child can make a flat mud pie. But when you hit the mountains of Colorado your perspective is radically changed, and you have it thrust into your soul that God is the artist par-excellence.

"The gorgeous grandeur;
The breath-taking beauty;
The gigantic gorges into the depths;
The piercing pinnacles that penetrate the clouds!
The endless panorama of rocks and trees!
Picture postcard settings in every direction!"

These scenes liberate you from all doubt: God is indeed the master Architect and Artist. Not only is God magnified by the mountains, but so is the potential of man. The mountains are a visual reminder of what God can do in any life. It is amazing to see the trees that cover the mountains like a garment. They seem to grow out of solid rock. A seed falls into a crevice with a small bit of soil, and it grows into a majestic tree right on the side of a rocky cliff. God made life in the mountains with such tenacity that is is determined to hang on and be beautiful for His glory regardless of the limitations.

So often we, as God's children, feel so inadequate. We lack resources and opportunity, and gifts, and so we focus on our limitations. The mountain perspective will change our focus and help us see God does not need a lot to work with to produce beauty. He makes life to flourish in hard places. So if you thing you are bound by limits and have but a mere speck of soil to grow in and no support from your environment-go to the mountains and see what God is doing all the time with that kind of meager resource and hostile environment. Whatever you have is enough for God to us to add beauty to life.

The point is, John saw heaven's glory from a mountain top, and all of us can enjoy that revelation with John, but we can also see that God is always revealing His best from the mountain top, and the more we can see all of life from the mountain perspective, the greater will be our optimism about the future, and about our potential to be used for the glory of God and His kingdom.

Leonardo DaVinci was inspired by the mountains to do creative works. William Douglas of the Supreme Court aid he never knew a mountain climber who was a mean or dishonest man. He felt the mountains had a very positive influence on man's character. All the great men of the Bible seemed to be mountain climbers. They went up on mountains to confront God and be motivated to do His will. I have only climbed one mountain myself, and it was a mere hill compared to real mountain climbing, but it was a terribly exhausting experience for which I was not in shape. I can sweat just reading about Edward Whymper, the English artist, who tried to climb the Matterhorn in 1861,62,63, and after 7 failed attempts, tried on the 8the time in 1865. With 7 men he finally made

it and they became the first men to conquer that mighty peak. They looked down and saw tiny dots moving up the slopes. They had just beaten a party of Italians. Four of the seven died on the way down. Coming down can be even more dangerous than climbing up.

Sir Lester Stephen said, "I believe that the ascent of mountains forms an essential chapter in the complete duty of man, and that it is wrong to leave any district without setting foot on its highest peak." He meant it literally as a fanatical mountain climber, but if you take it spiritually he has a point. It is a Christian obligation to see life from the mountain perspective and see it from the highest peak, for only then can you have the mind of Christ, who sees all from the heights. The hills are indeed alive with music from that highest perspective. In Isa. 44:23 we read, "Sing for joy, o heavens, for the Lord has done this: shout aloud, o earth beneath, burst into song, you mountains, you forests and all your trees, for the Lord has redeemed Jacob, he displays his glory in Israel." In 49:13 he says again, "Burst into song, o mountains, for the Lord comforts his people."

We are to join the mountain in everlasting praise, and strive to ever see all of life from that high perspective where we are motivated to walk with our Savior on a higher level. May God help us to feel what the poet conveys in these words:

"I'm going by the upper road,
For that still holds the sun.
I'm climbing through nights pastures
Where the stormy rivers run.
If you should think to find me
In my old dark abode,
You'll find this writing on the door,
He's on the upper road."

May God find us all there ever climbing to see life from the mountain perspective.

19. THE PRESENCE OF GOD Based on Rev. 21:3

A four year old attended a prayer meeting with his parents, and that night when he knelt to say his prayers before going to bed he prayed, "Dear Lord, we had a good time at church tonight. I wish you could have been there." The child was not critical of the church as being godless, he was merely expressing a childlike literalism concerning the presence of God. To be present to a child is to be seen, touched, and heard. To be present to a child is to be available to the senses. Even an amateur theologian could quickly set the child straight and point out the reality of the presence of things unseen and unheard. Numerous verses of Scripture could be quoted to assure him that God is always present. He has promised to be with us always, and to never forsake us. Where two or three are gathered in His name Christ said He would be present in their midst. The historian could point to the experience of the saints down through the centuries who were aware of the presence of God at all times, even when they were not gathered with two or three.

Madam Guyon could set in prison and write:

My Lord, how full of sweet content,
I pass my years of banishment.
Where'er I dwell, I dwell with Thee,
In heaven, in earth, or on the sea.

David said that God is so persistently present with the believer that there is nowhere to go escape His presence. In Psa. 139:7-10 he writes, "Whither shall I go from thy spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there; if I make my bed in hell, behold thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me."

What a contrast this is with the testimony of the first Russian cosmonaut who ascended into the heavens and said he saw no God. What a contrast to the dark conclusion arrived at by Jean Paul Richter the German skeptic of the last century. He wrote, "There is no God. I have traversed the worlds. I have risen to the suns, I have passed athwart the great waste places of the sky. There is no God. I have descended to the place where the very shadow casts by Being dies out and ends. I have gazed into the gulf beyond and cried "Where art thou, Father?" But no answer came, save the sound of the storm which rages uncontrolled. We are orphans, you and I-Every soul in this great corpse-trench of the universe is utterly alone."

Here was a man who experienced the real absence of God as deeply as believers experience the real presence of God. To some God is nowhere present; to others God is everywhere present. Ralph Cushman could write:

I met God in the morning
When my day was at its best,
And His presence came like sunrise,
Like a glory in my breast.
All day long the Presence lingered,
All day long He stayed with me,
And we sailed in perfect calmness
O'er a very troubled sea.

There is an obvious conflict of experience. The child and the skeptic experience the absence of God, whereas the saint and poet experience the presence of God. The believer recognizes that the child and the skeptic are victims of the same misconception. They are both looking for a physical and visible presence rather than a spiritual presence. They want an objective presence rather than a subjective presence. We know that as the child matures and develops a spiritual maturity he will become aware of unseen values. He will learn to appreciate the reality of God's presence in spirit. We know that if the skeptic would open his heart to Christ, the eyes of his soul would lose their scales, and he too would be enlightened as to the reality of things unseen.

What we seldom or never stop to realize is that it is the child's and the skeptic's longing for the visible presence of God that is the ideal. The experience of the mystic who is caught up into a trance and senses his oneness with God is not the ideal experience of the presence of God. The ideal is not that of being aware of the peace and power of God within your life giving you strength and guidance. As precious as these experiences are, they are temporal and fall short of the eternal

experience John describes here where we will dwell with God and He with us, and we shall fellowship with Jesus in physical form.

Faith is essential but not eternal. Faith is not the ideal. We walk by faith now, but the ideal and ultimate will be to walk by sight in the new heaven and new earth. The ideal will be when all of our senses are as relevant in spiritual experiences as they now are in physical experiences. Paul said, "Now abide faith, hope, and love, but the greatest of these is love." Why? Because love alone is eternal. Faith and hope will be no more when we reach the ideal and dwell with God and He with us. Love, however, will continue for all eternity. Love is the greatest thing in time and eternity, and it is the perfect link between the two."

It is love that longs to experience all that can be experienced of the presence of God within time. The ideal of both the Old Testament and the New Testament is to enter the presence of God to the highest degree possible. The ultimate goal being to be in His objective presence. The two fold ideal for time and eternity is illustrated in the 23rd Psalm where the Psalmist says he can walk through the valley of the shadow of death and fear no evil for God is with him. The presence of the Lord as his shepherd gives full assurance under any circumstance. Augustus Toplady put it:

Lord! It is not life to live
If thy presence thou deny;
Lord! If thou thy presence give,
Tis no longer death-to die.

When the Lord is near there is no fear. This is the testimony of the Psalmist as his journey through time, but what does he say concerning the end and goal of the journey? He says that after goodness and mercy follow him all the days of his life, he will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. We have no idea how much this eternal dwelling in God's house meant to the Old Testament saint, but surely it is clear that he recognized and even greater presence of God to come than the presence he experienced in the valley. The final and highest goal of man is to dwell with God. Jesus assured His disciples that His Father's house had many mansions, or rooms, and that they would be received into that dwelling with Him. The goal of Old Testament and New Testament saints is the same: To dwell in the very visible presence of God.

In the Garden of Eden God walked with Adam and talked with Him, and was visible in a form, and audible as a voice. Enoch walked with God, and Noah did also even after the fall. We do not know if God was still manifesting Himself in visible form, but it could well be, since as late as Abraham's time he appeared in the form of a man to Abraham, and later to Moses. We have so trained ourselves in spiritual thinking that the physical presence of God seems like a childish idea, and we think it is primitive. But, as a matter of fact, it is the most advanced concept possible, and here in Revelation we are told that when paradise is regained we shall regain with it the face to face fellowship with God. John says elsewhere that we shall see Christ as He is and be like Him. Jesus said, "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God."

The seeing of God has a spiritual interpretation, and we tend to stress that and ignore a literal interpretation, for it seems impossible. At least this is so with Protestants. I have never read a Protestant sermon on the saints vision of God as they dwell in His very presence, but the Catholics make a great deal of this which they call the Beatific Vision. It is interesting to consider a Catholic's

criticism of the Protestant view of heaven. It could very well be that we have something to learn from their emphasis. A Jesuit, P. J. Boudreaux, in his book *The Happiness Of Heaven*, has a chapter on errors to be avoided in meditating about heaven.

His first point is this: "The first error consists in ignoring or making little of the Beatific Vision, after the resurrection, and letting our mind pass from creature to creature, gathering exquisite pleasures from each, until practically we make man's happiness in heaven come almost exclusively from creatures. This is substantially the view which Protestants take of heaven. They have written books on the subject in which they speak eloquently and even learnedly on the joys involved in the mutual recognition of friends and kindred, on the delights we shall enjoy in our social intercourse with the saints and angels, in the music that shall ravish our very souls, and other things of that nature." He continues:

In the Protestant view of heaven, the Beatific Vision is either entirely ignored, or, if mentioned at all, it is explained so as to mean next to nothing, at least, it does not appear to add anything to the exquisite happiness already enjoyed in creatures. In their view heaven is really nothing more than a natural beatitude, such as might have been enjoyed even in this world, if Adam had not sinned. We must, therefore, be on our guard against any view of heaven which would make its principle happiness come from creatures. We must ever remember that no creature, either here or hereafter, can give perfect happiness to man.....This, then, is the first error to be avoided, and with much care; not only because it is untrue, but because also it lowers the beatitude of heaven, which consists essentially in the vision, love and enjoyment of God Himself."

We could counter this criticism by showing him our hymn, *I Want To See My Savior First Of All*, but our defense would be weak. Just about every book I could find on the vision of, and presence of God was written by a Catholic. This may appear to be a minor area of theology, but it is a part of the ultimate goal of the believer, and, therefore, we ought to take the criticism of our neglect in this area seriously. If we take the ideal seriously, we will also be more diligent in seeking to experience the partial, but real, presence of God now.

Phillips Brooks, one of America's greatest preachers, said about 100 years ago, "The greatest danger facing all of us....is not that we shall make an absolute failure of life, nor that we shall fall into outright viciousness, nor that we shall be terribly unhappy, nor that we shall feel life has no meaning at all....not these things. The danger is that we may fail to perceive life's greatest meaning; fall short of its highest goal; miss its deepest and most abiding happiness; be unable to render the most needed service; be unconscious of life ablaze with the light of the Presence of God....and be content to have it so.....that is the danger."

I think if we are honest with ourselves we will have to admit that we not only neglect the idea of the ultimate vision and presence of God, but we also neglect to practice the presence of God in our daily lives. We do not have to reject great truths to lose their value. We need only neglect them.

In the Old Testament God dwelt in the temple, or before that, in the Tabernacle. His presence was to be found in a place. In the New Testament all this is radically changed and the physical temple is destroyed and the people themselves become the temple of the presence of God. It is not longer in a place but in persons. The presence of God takes on new dimensions in the New Testament. The Son came down and tabernacled with men. At Pentecost the Holy Spirit came down and indwelt men.

The final step is that revealed here by John. God the Father will dwell with men. This will be the fulfillment of the hopes of all the saints of all time. Meanwhile it is our privilege and responsibility to be persons of the Presence and temples of the Spirit.

Not in temples made with hands,
In shrine or altar there,
God hath chosen to abide
The Scriptures plain declare.

In the hearts of men who love
Their neighbors, He abides.
In His Spirit's fullness here,
Richly Christ resides.

Let our hearts, O loving God,
Thy living temples be.
May our neighbors in our love
Thy presence ever see.

Author unknown

Let us be determined to give more conscious thought to this whole matter of the temporal and eternal presence of God.