

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

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Speaker: Mr. Jonathan Hughes

Revelation 19-22 - The Church and the Great White Throne

In the classic words of Mr. Beaver, in CS Lewis' *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*, "Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight, At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more, When he bares his teeth, winter meets its death, and when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again." That just about sums up the contents of these final chapters of the book of Revelation. No other book deals with the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ as much as this book does. No wonder Satan has done his best, over the centuries, to keep Christians from reading this part of the Bible. Too often his lies about it being of no practical benefit to us today, and too full of complex images, have kept many from a proper study of this part of Scripture. And so, sadly, many remain ignorant about what should be most dear to the heart of any believer. Through the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, God will put all to right. He will do all that He had purposed to do, even before time began, and He alone will reign supreme.

In chapter 18 we saw the complete destruction of the false religious system, referred to as Babylon. That which was an evil imitation of the Church of God had been judged and removed. We read in 19:1 that this is a cause for praise and celebration for those who had the honour of the Lord Jesus at heart: "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and honour and power to the Lord our God!" How appropriate it is that as soon as that which is false is removed, that which is true again comes into view. After the end of chapter 3, the Church has not particularly been in view throughout the book of Revelation. At first sight this may seem to be strange when we consider the importance to the earth of the events described in this book. The absence of the Church from the description of such momentous earthly events is however, understandable when we view her future as heavenly. In John 14:3, Jesus had reassured His disciples with the words "that where I am, there you may be also." In similar vein, Paul had reminded the Thessalonian believers in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, "After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord."

So we come to the second cause in this chapter for glory to be given to God. In verse 7 we read "Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His bride has made herself ready." Here, in heaven, the Church again comes into view as the bride of the Lamb, the Lord Jesus. Ephesians 5, uses a similar picture, where the love of Christ is in view. Eastern weddings followed the pattern of betrothal, followed by the marriage rites and then the wedding supper, or feast. As believers, we are betrothed to Christ now. Soon He will return for us, and we shall be united to Him forever. Here, in this chapter, the supper, the celebration of the love the groom has for his bride is about to occur. Frequently, before the marriage rites, a groom would not have seen his bride, as all was arranged by the parents. There must have been occasions when this resulted in disappointment! Nothing could be further from what we have here. In Song of Solomon 4 the groom could say, "You are all fair, my love, and there is no spot in you." Again, in Ephesians 5, the bride is described as being presented to Himself "not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish." How wonderful the way in which all of the Bible fits together. How beautiful the love that Jesus has for His bride, the Church, you and me. It should produce a sense of immense gratitude in me, that He could describe me as "all beautiful" and "without spot" Yet that is exactly what we have here. The bride has readied herself, and is seen as dressed in fine linen. We are told that this fine linen represents the righteous acts of the saints. Now it is quite clear that my life could not be described as "fine linen" at present. For sure there may be a few, pitifully few, righteous acts, but they are all mixed in with selfish ambitions and sinful desires. Something must have occurred before the events of this chapter to settle this matter.

1 Corinthians 3 and 2 Corinthians 5 speak of the time when all Christians will appear before the judgement seat of Christ. This is not a place for the judgement of sin. Romans 8:1, makes this quite clear: "There is, therefore, no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Instead the judgement seat of Christ is a place where an evaluation of a life of service is made. Only that which has been done for Him will be of any value. Today we place so much emphasis on career advancement and salary earned, academic qualifications achieved and leisure skills. These things have earned their reward now and do not impress the One who sees all things. Only that which we have done for Him will count in that day: all else will be destroyed to leave us in a faultless condition. Then, and only then, will we be seen as dressed in linen, ready for Him. But before we move on, let us fully weigh the implications of this account that we shall give of our lives. What will it be, in that day, to suffer loss, to stand before Him with nothing to offer because here and now, I have lived only to satisfy my own desires? And let us be encouraged. All that we do for Him now, though so often unnoticed, will in that day receive our Master's "Well done." Our usefulness to Him in a future

day is decided now. How short our time of service now, compared to the time for reward in a future day. We will consider that day soon, but all things done then will be for His glory.

I can still just about remember the time before I was married. No matter what my fiancée wore, she looked great – at least, that's what I thought! On the day of our wedding, she looked absolutely splendid in her wedding dress. Here was a beautiful person ready to share her life with me unreservedly. That reflected well on me. As the Bride of Christ, we shall not be caught up with our own beauty. Nor shall we be the centre of attention. No, our beauty will only serve to amplify His glory. The more beautiful we are, so to speak, the more glorious He will be.

Another group of saved souls is in view in heaven. They are those who are invited to the supper, the friends of the groom. Plainly different from the bride, it would not be unreasonable to see these as the Old Testament saints, of whom John the Baptist was chief (see Matthew 11:11).

The rest of chapter 19 brings us to the end of that period of time referred to as the Great Tribulation. At present, Jesus stands in relation to the world as a rejected Saviour, the Nazarene left on a cross to die. He is nothing more than a religious figure from history and His name is so often used as a swear word. And yet, in His time, He shall return. No longer the Babe of Bethlehem, He will come in all His majesty. This is not a scene of uncontrolled revenge and bloodlust, and yet it will result in the complete destruction of all mankind's open opposition to God. In righteousness He will come, and that righteousness will demand the overthrow of all that has presumed to stand against the authority of God. He will be the King of all those who reign, and He will be the master of all those who exercise authority. With Him shall come His armies, or whom we shall form a part, not as participants in the battle, but as witnesses to His righteous judgement. All opposition to God is gathered together at this final battle, and is summarily destroyed. The false prophet and the beast, who had so openly opposed God are immediately judged and thrown into that place of eternal separation from God, described as a lake of fire. What a place of suffering! At this stage of man's history the judgements spoken of in Matthew 25 will take place. But God has not finally demonstrated His glory and righteousness yet. And so we come to the events of chapters 20 and 21.

The Old Testament scriptures, particularly parts of Isaiah and Ezekiel, look forward to a time of unsurpassed glory for the nation of Israel. Here, at the beginning of chapter 20, we have its time course set out: 1,000 years, the Millennium. It will be a time of great prosperity, peace and righteousness for the whole world. Here, in chapter 20, we are given the reason for that. Satan will be bound, no longer able to wreak his destructive ways amongst mankind. Along with Christ we will reign, and as verse 4 states, we will exercise judgement on His behalf (1 Corinthians 6:3 gives us another aspect of our role as judges). One of the criticisms levelled against those who do not see the Church marching on until all the world is converted, but rather see it taken out of the world before judgement falls, is that it appears to remove the need for Christians to have any moral influence upon the world now. On the surface this may seem to be true, and yet nothing could be further from the truth. The fact that one day we shall exercise judgement over this world should have the profoundest influence upon what I do now. It has well been said that "If I am to judge the world then God would not have me meddling with the world now." What moral authority can I have, then, to judge something that I have embraced now? It is not right that I ally myself to some worldly organisation or activity which, in a future day, I will have to judge. Christian friend, let us all look closely at what we allow into our lives now in view of that day. I am convinced that any rewards for service performed now will be exercised and enjoyed during the Millennium. They will all be for Christ's glory. Any loss suffered due to lack of service now will also be felt during those thousand years.

And yet at the end of these thousand years, Satan is released to perform his final act of rebellion against God. Here we see how evil the heart of man truly is. Jeremiah 17:9 states "the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure" Here, in all its open ugliness, we see mankind for what we truly are. After 1,000 years of God's open goodness, when Christ Himself, present among His people, has caused unimaginable good, we might have thought that everyone would have been converted and ready to acknowledge Him as Lord. Evil may have been suppressed, but it has not disappeared. Now, at Satan's instigation, mankind rebels against God in a final act of foolish disobedience. It, like all rebellion against God, is crushed and now Satan joins the false prophet and the Beast in an unholy trinity of evil in the lake of fire.

Revelation 20 speaks about a first and second resurrection, and also a second, and by inference first, death (Luke 14: 14 and Philippians 3:11 also talk about these two resurrections). Quite simply, the first resurrection is a resurrection to life and blessing. Those who have died having expressed faith in God will take part in the first resurrection. For the Christian this will occur at the Rapture; for those godly souls who die during the Tribulation, refusing to accept the authority of Satan, it will be before the commencement of the Millennium. However, at the end of the Millennium, a second resurrection occurs. All those who have died without faith in Christ will be raised for judgement. There will be no escape. God's righteousness demands no less. So we see at the end of chapter 20 a great white throne established. All those who have died unsaved, from the creation through to the end of time will appear before God. He will judge them. Their refusal to accept Him will condemn them whilst their works will proscribe the extent of that judgement. There is no place here for the Christian. The presence of the book of life confirms that. The Lord knows them that are His; He needs no book to remind Himself of those saved through faith. No, the book of life, containing

the names of all the saved throughout history, stands as a testimony to the lost, that their names are not there. So God's judgement is just. These are solemn, solemn words and yet God's love and God's judgement are but two sides of the same coin. The one demands the other. Those today, who reject Christ as Saviour, will appear before this great white throne of righteousness and stand condemned. Their fate, awful yet assured, closes this dreadful chapter: eternal separation from the presence of God – the second death.

The first verses of chapter 21 run on to the end of time itself. They provide the fullest description in the entire Bible of what may be described as the eternal state. There will be absolute perfection in everything. Even during the Millennium sin was still present, though much reduced. But here, sin, and its inevitable consequence, death, is a thing of the past. How marvellous that timeless state will be! That which God desired from the beginning, fellowship with man, will at last be fully realised. He will dwell with His people and He will be all and in all. David could praise saying, "In your presence is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures for evermore" (Psalm 16:11). But how can a finite mind begin to understand the glories of an infinite God?

From 21:9 to 22:5 we are then taken back in time to find a fuller description of the Lamb's wife – the Church. Whilst in chapter 19 it was the bride, here it is the wife. The relationship is settled and permanent. Although highly figurative, and in parts maybe difficult to understand, even the quickest reading of this description leaves one with a sense of splendour. Here we have the displayed excellence of what the Lord Jesus Christ has achieved. The picture used to describe the Church is one of a city. It is not a tent, here today and gone tomorrow, but a city. Here we have a fixed and permanent dwelling. Throughout Israel's history, Jerusalem was the place where God had, in a very particular fashion, decided to make His presence. There the temple would be built, at the very heart of their religious life. So the picture speaks of God dwelling with His Church. What a wonder it will be to be daily in the presence of God! The condition of the Church is settled too; it will not change to follow the fashions of this world. All the earth will be blessed by her presence. The wall surrounding the city speaks of the clear distinction made between those who are inside and those who are not. Those who are members of His body, the Church, are not to be confused with other people. Its appearance is characterised by pure gold, like transparent glass. This suggests to my mind, at least, the royal character that we shall inherit as those that belong to Christ. It also speaks of transparency. Our condition will be seen to be right and perfect. Access to this city is via a gate likened to a great pearl. We are immediately reminded of Jesus' own words in Matthew 13 about the pearl collector who, having found one priceless pearl went and sold all that he had to gain that pearl. There will always be, even in heaven, a very clear reminder of the enormity of the price paid and the sacrificial cost to the Lord Jesus to win for Himself His bride.

In great distinction to the earthly city Jerusalem, this heavenly Jerusalem, the Church, needs no temple. God Himself will be present there and His glory will shine so brightly that even the sun, in all its powerful brilliance, becomes unnecessary. Fellow Christian, when the pathway of obedience to Him seems lonely and you grow weary with doing good, think on these things.

The Church will exist as an eternal testimony to His glory, for everything that we will be is as a result of what He has done for us. During the Millennium the whole earth will be blessed by the presence of the Church. In that day all will be settled; no actions of ours will ever again be able to dishonour Him. How different from today when, sadly, so often non-Christians will point to the actions of one part of the church or another and use their behaviour as an excuse not to consider seriously the claims of Christ. Even through me, others will see His glory as I stand to be a reflection of His splendid character. What a glorious Saviour, and what a cause for praise now this should be. All will be put to right when Jesus comes in sight!

These things cannot come soon enough, - not for us, nor for Him who loved us and gave Himself for us. Can you not still remember the eager anticipation and growing excitement you felt as your wedding day approached? Soon what was promised would be fulfilled. How much more does our Saviour long for that word from His Father to go and bring His bride home. Three times His promise is confirmed, "I am coming quickly." He will come, but as with all things, it will be in His time. Yet our hearts cannot but echo the thoughts of John the apostle, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus!"

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