



SECRET CHURCH HEAVEN, HELL, AND THE END OF THE WORLD

Well, good evening! Welcome to Secret Church. Tonight, we are joined together with 60,000 people across all 50 United States, 6 Canadian provinces, and over 50 different countries from Cameroon to Malta to Japan to India to Poland to outer Mongolia, and for the first time ever tonight, Secret Church is being translated live into Spanish. So, Hola, mi hermanos and hermanas. Dios Te Bendiga! If you guys could translate that into English, that'd be great. So, literally, in different parts of the country and the world, and even in different languages, we have gathered together tonight to consider, "Heaven, Hell, and the End of the World."

You know, I mentioned a couple of Secret Churches ago, when we covered "Family, Marriage, Sex, and the Gospel," that someone once said, "If you want to draw a crowd, all you have to do is talk about one of three things. One, you can talk about the end times. Two, you can talk about sex. Or, three, if you really want to draw a crowd, you can talk about sex in the end times." So, I have a promise for you tonight: In our last session, we are going to talk about sex in the end times, so you don't want to fall asleep before then!

In all seriousness, I want to jump right into the weightiness of the topic before us tonight. If you'll pull out that Study Guide that you hopefully received wherever you are, whether in a church gathering or in a home. For those of you who are new to Secret Church, I hope you have chosen wisely in the person you are sitting next to right now, because you're going to need them. If they are a frequent dozer or if they are not good listeners or note-takers, you are going to be at a significant disadvantage. So, look around the room, or in your house or church, and if it's not too late, you might want to make a switch!

However, the purpose of this Study Guide is multi-faceted, and one of those purposes is to enable us to cover as much biblical material as possible in one sitting. When I have gathered together with our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world at the risk of their lives, they make the most of that time.

So, our goal tonight is to make the most of our time, to drink from the fire hydrant of God's Word. We can digest later, but in the process of making the most of our time, we want to equip one another with God's Word in this world. I want to remind you, whether this is your first Secret Church or you have been to every Secret Church, that the goal tonight is not entertainment; the goal is equipping.

This is key. The goal is not just for 60,000 people to have a good Bible study tonight. If that's our goal, then we have missed the point from the start. The goal tonight is for 60,000 people to consider the eternal weight of heaven, hell, and the end of the world, and to leave this place, and the places where you are gathered all around the world, equipped with the Word of God and empowered by the Spirit of God to make the gospel of God known, the good news of how men, women, and children can be saved from everlasting wrath and experience everlasting joy. That's the point tonight, which leads us right into the first part of these notes.

Where We Need To Begin...

We need to pause.

We need to pause at the outset of our time, tonight, and realize that in this world, we are continually blinded by the temporal, and we are subtly numbed by the trivial. We have busy lives. Many of us have come to this gathering from busy work days and busy weeks, and so much of our busyness revolves around the temporal and the trivial. We busy ourselves climbing corporate ladders. We amuse ourselves through hours of social media and Internet surfing and TV and movie watching and game playing. We spend ourselves on new possessions and new pleasures. We work out our bodies excessively. We worship our sports incessantly. We run our children all across town teaching them to value things that don't last, and in the middle of it all, we desperately need to contemplate the eternal.

So many things that we focus our lives on today will not matter ten years from now, much less, ten billion years from now. This is where Scripture draws our attention, particularly tonight, to what will matter ten billion years from now. A.W. Tozer said,

Let no one apologize for the powerful emphasis Christianity lays upon the doctrine of the world to come. Right there lies its immense superiority to everything else within the whole sphere of human thought or experience. When Christ arose from death and ascended into heaven He established forever three important facts; namely, that this world has been condemned to ultimate dissolution, that the human spirit persists beyond the grave and that there is indeed a world to come The church is constantly being tempted to accept this world as her home, and sometimes she has listened to the blandishments of those who would woo her away and use her for their own ends. But if she is wise she will consider that she stands in the valley between the mountain peaks of eternity past and eternity to come. The past is gone forever and the present is passing as swift as the shadow on the sundial of Ahaz. Even if the earth should continue a million years, not one of us could stay to enjoy it. We do well to think of the long tomorrow.

So, tonight, we're going to pause and think about the long tomorrow.

We need to listen with humility.

Now, as we pause, we need to listen with humility. The kinds of things we're contemplating tonight, we can't afford to be wrong on. We don't want to live in a world of conjecture when it comes to eternal realities, especially, when we know what is certain. That's why this Study Guide is filled with God's Word, because God's Word is the only foundation upon which we can stand when we think about these things. Jesus said, *"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."* (Matthew 24:35) What transcends this world? The Word of God, so tonight, let's minimize the thoughts of man and magnify the truth of God.

Now, I've got quotes from different people like Tozer just a second ago scattered throughout these notes, but the purpose of these quotes from men and women is purely to point us more to the truth of God, and this is important. There are so many thoughts of man swirling around, not just our culture, but the church today, about heaven, hell, and the end of the world.

Do you know what the best-selling evangelical book of the past decade is? *Heaven is For Real*, a fanciful account of heaven told by a four-year-old boy. He talks about how he got a

halo and wings, though he didn't like them because they were too small. He claims that he sat on Jesus' lap while angels sang to him. He even met the Holy Spirit, whom he describes as "kind of blue." Over 7 million copies sold.

This is not to be confused with another book entitled *The Boy Who Came Back from Heaven*, another best-seller by a man named Kevin Malarkey, pun intended, whose 6-year-old son allegedly made multiple trips to heaven and back after a devastating car accident. Malarkey's son, Alex, has personally seen Satan many times. He describes him as having a "funny looking mouth" and "a few moldy teeth", no noticeable ears, two bony arms, and two bony legs.

These books not to be confused with *My Journey To Heaven: What I saw And How it Changed by My Life*, by Marvin Besteman; *Flight To Heaven* by Dale Black; *To Heaven and Back: A True Story* by Mary Neal; *90 Minutes in Heaven* by Don, not John, Piper; *Nine Days in Heaven* by Dennis Prince; and *23 Minutes in Hell* by Bill Weise, none of which you will see in the recommended reading at the end of this study guide!

Make no mistake: There is money to be made in peddling fiction about the afterlife as non-fiction in the world of Christian publishing today. That's what's so disturbing about the entire trend. These books are being published and devoured by people who would describe themselves as born-again, Bible-believing Christians. All of this shows that our level of discernment in the church today is extremely low. The whole premise behind every one of these books is contrary to everything God's Word says about heaven. John MacArthur sums it up best. I don't have the quote in your guide, but he points to these two verses, Proverbs 30:4 and John 3:13, when he says,

For anyone who truly believes the biblical record, it is impossible to resist the conclusion that these modern testimonies—with their relentless self-focus and the relatively scant attention they pay to the glory of God—are simply untrue. They are either figments of the human imagination (dreams, hallucinations, false memories, fantasies, and in the worst cases, deliberate lies), or else they are products of demonic deception.

He continues:

We know this with absolute certainty, because Scripture definitively says that people do not go to heaven and come back: "*Who has ascended to heaven and come down?*" (Proverbs 30:4). Answer: "*No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man*" (John 3:13). All the accounts of heaven in Scripture are visions, not journeys taken by dead people. And even visions of heaven are very, very rare in Scripture. You can count them all on one hand.

"*Who has ascended to heaven and come down? ... Surely you know!*" (Proverbs 30:4) John 3:13, "*No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.*"

Four biblical authors had visions about heaven and wrote about what they saw: Isaiah, Ezekiel, Paul, and John. All of these were prophetic visions, not near-death experiences. Not one person raised from the dead in the Old Testament or New Testament ever wrote down what he or she experienced in heaven, including Lazarus, who was in a grave for four days.

I was reading the other day. Paul, in 2 Corinthians 12, describes being caught up into heaven, but he gave no details; he summed it up in three verses. One author said,

All the biblical writers who saw heaven and described their visions give comparatively sparse details, but they agree perfectly. Their visions are all fixated on God's glory, which defines heaven and illuminates everything there. They are overwhelmed, chagrined, petrified, and put to silence by the sheer majesty of God's holiness. Notably missing from all the biblical accounts are the frivolous features and juvenile attractions that seem to dominate every account of heaven currently on the bestseller lists.

Why, then, are so many of us buying this stuff? We have the Word of God! Let's minimize the thoughts of man and magnify, trust, bank our lives and our future on the truth of God.

At the same time, let's lay aside our traditions and submit to God's Word. None of us wants to believe things about heaven, hell, and the end of the world just because we grew up hearing something taught. Too much is at stake in our lives and in others' lives. For the sake of our tradition, Matthew 15:6, we don't want to make void the Word of God. Matthew 15:1-6 says,

Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat." He answered them, "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God commanded, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' But you say, 'If anyone tells his father or his mother, "What you would have gained from me is given to God," he need not honor his father.' So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God."

Now, that doesn't mean that simply in reading God's Word, we'll come to entire agreement on every single detail about heaven, hell, and the end of the world. Many Bible-believing Christians have different understandings of different passages in Scripture. So, then, let's leave room for disagreement; among us tonight, even, let's leave room for disagreement over secondary and tertiary doctrines while celebrating agreement on primary doctrines.

Now, here's what I mean by that. Ephesians 4:1-6 says,

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit - just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call - one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

This passage calls us to the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, so we long for unity around Christ our Lord and under God our Father in the fellowship of the Spirit, which means we need to do theological triage in our lives, in our churches, and in the greater church around the world.

So, follow with me here: Christians, obviously...well, I hope this is obvious...Christians obviously divide from non-Christians over primary doctrines, and Christians are willing to die for these doctrines. So, primary doctrines like the humanity and deity of Jesus, the

substitutionary death of Christ on the cross for our sins, His resurrection from the grave, justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone; the kind of doctrines that, if you don't believe them, you're not a Christian. The kind of doctrines that you die for. Deny Christ or be imprisoned, and you say, "Prison." Deny Christ or die, and you say, "Die."

However, then there are other doctrines that are important in Scripture but not primary, and churches distinguish themselves from one another over secondary doctrines, yet they partner together around primary doctrines. So, think here, for example, about baptism. Baptist churches believe in the baptism of a believer by immersion. Presbyterian churches believe in the baptism of infants by sprinkling. Are both Christians? Absolutely. Though I believe in a Christian's baptism by immersion, I love, respect, and honor Presbyterian brothers and sisters...some of the churches who have gathered together tonight have different views on baptism...and I honor those churches, their members, and their pastors. I just think they're wrong on baptism, and they think I'm wrong, and that's okay.

So, can we partner together in the spread of the gospel in our cities and among the nations? Absolutely, we can. Are going to be in the same local church? Probably not. I have biblical convictions that would keep me from baptizing an infant. They have, what they call, biblical convictions that lead them to baptize infants, and it's good that we don't compromise on our convictions. However, at the same time, we realize that this doesn't divide us as Christians.

Then, there are third-tier, tertiary doctrines, and Christians in the same church disagree with one another over tertiary doctrines, but it does not in any way decrease the intimacy of their fellowship with one another. This...so follow with me...this is where I want us to be very careful tonight. We're going to talk about some things that are primary in importance. I would include the nature of salvation here and the reality of heaven and hell. However, we're also going to talk about some things that are all the way down here on the third-level of importance: Views on the book of Revelation, interpretations of the millennium, and as we wade into some of these issues, I want us to be careful not to divide over them and not to let them in any way decrease the intimacy of our fellowship in local churches.

So, my goal tonight on issues like this is to present different sides as faithfully as I can, and then at points, I will say, "Here's where I come down on this." But, even as I do, I know that some of you have studied Revelation, and you also have convictions about how to interpret it and how to understand the millennium that will be different than where I come down, and what I want to say clearly is that this should never be a cause for breaking fellowship within the body of Christ. I preached through Revelation last year here at Brook Hills, and there were brothers and sisters who were disagreeing with me every week, but together we were joyfully studying the Word, uniting around what is clear, and agreeing to disagree on that which is not as clear.

So, here's our guiding principle tonight. In essentials, unity, and in non-essentials, liberty. Let's be free to disagree on third-order doctrines while we stake our lives together around the world on first-order doctrines. When I say "stake our lives together on these things", that's exactly what I mean.

We need to live with urgency.

Tonight, we need to pause, we need to listen with humility to God's Word, and in the end we need to live with urgency in this world. Do we believe this book? If we do, the ramifications are deafening for the world that we live in. If this book is true, if Jesus is the only way to be saved from sin and restored and reconciled to God...there are seven billion people in the world, and most liberal estimates put about one-third of the world Christian, and that's even people who claim to be Christians. In some cases, that's even a social or

political identification. Most are not actually followers of Christ, but even if we assumed that they were, that still leaves 4.7 billion people, who at this moment, are on the road that leads to an eternal hell if nothing changes. And about a billion and a half of those have never even heard the gospel that we are going to talk about tonight. Billions of people on a road that leads to hell.

If this book is true, then we don't have time to waste our lives living out a nice, comfortable, Christian spin on the American dream. It doesn't make sense, if we believe this tonight, for a people to casually just go on with life as normal, as if the culture around us is doing just fine, makes no sense. For those that believe this book, we have a Master who demands radical sacrifice, and we have a mission that warrants radical urgency.

Jonathan Edwards wrote that he was "Resolved, to endeavor to my utmost to act as I can think I should do, if I had already seen the happiness of heaven, and hell torments." Oh, God, give us this perspective! Brothers and sisters, we stand on the porch of eternity. Even the youngest among us tonight has, at most, 80 or 90 years left; 80 or 90 years to be followed by thousands upon thousands upon millions upon millions upon billions upon trillions of years. Will we look back ten trillion years from now, knowing what we know then, and wish we'd made more money? Wish we'd been more comfortable? Wish we'd lived more for ourselves? No, not at all.

So, let's live with urgency with a height of confidence that has no fear in the face of the future. A confidence that says, yes, *"For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."* (Philippians 1:21) Let's live with a breadth of compassion that compels us to lay down our lives for the lost. Hear Paul in Romans 9:1-3. He says, *"I am speaking the truth in Christ - I am not lying; my conscience bears witness in the Holy Spirit - that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could not wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh."* He's saying that if he could, he would give up his salvation and go to hell for the sake of the lost, specifically here the people of Israel who were not trusting in Jesus the Messiah. He would stand on the brink of damnation and throw himself in, if it would mean that they would experience eternal life.

God, give us this kind of compassion, and remember who it's for here. Remember that the Jewish people were persecuting Paul, they had beaten him, they had imprisoned him, they had stoned him and left him for dead, and he's saying this about them. Brother or sister, would you go to hell for the sake of militant Muslims in the Middle East? Hebrews 12:1-3 says,

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

May we live with a breadth of compassion that compels us to lay down our lives for the lost, and may we live with a depth of courage that defies death in this world. Oh, we're going to talk later about how this is much of the point of the book of Revelation, to encourage Christians to give, even lose, their lives in this world for the spread of the gospel. Revelation 2:9-10 says,

"I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life."

So, may it be said of us...may it be said of 60,000 people who gathered together on Good Friday to contemplate heaven and hell and the Word of God and the world around us...may it be said of us that loyalty to God is more important to us than life itself. Revelation 12:10-11,

And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, "Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death."

May that be our testimony! Oh, see it: The world's highest goal is to preserve physical life, but that is not the highest goal of the Christian. Our highest goal is to obey God, even if it means we lose our physical lives. Hear the testimony of Old Testament saints in Hebrews 11:13-16, who,

...all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

The author continues in Hebrews 11:35-40,

Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

Hear the testimony of New Testament apostles. Acts 5:29, *"But Peter and the apostles answered, 'We must obey God rather than men.'"* They rejoiced, *"and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus."* (Acts 5:40-42)

Acts 14:20-22 says,

But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe. When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.

Paul said in Acts 20:22-24, "And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God."

Also, Acts 21:13, "Then Paul answered, 'What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.'" Second Corinthians 11:23-27 says,

Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

Hear the testimony of martyrs throughout history. Hear the disciples and authors of the Gospels. An unknown author said,

Matthew suffered martyrdom by being slain with a sword at a distant city of Ethiopia. Mark expired at Alexandria, after being cruelly dragged through the streets of that city. Luke was hanged upon an olive tree in the classic land of Greece. John was put in a cauldron of boiling oil, but escaped death in a miraculous manner, and was afterward banished to Patmos. Peter was crucified at Rome with his head downward. James, the Greater, was beheaded at Jerusalem. James, the Less, was thrown from a lofty pinnacle of the temple, and then beaten to death with a fuller's club. Bartholomew was flayed alive. Andrew was bound to a cross, whence he preached to his persecutors until he died. Thomas was run through the body with a lance at Coromandel in the East Indies. Jude was shot to death with arrows. Matthias was first stoned and then beheaded. Barnabas of the Gentiles was stoned to death at Salonica. Paul, after various tortures and persecutions, was at length beheaded at Rome by the Emperor Nero.

Justin Martyr said,

No one makes us afraid or leads us into captivity as we have set our faith on Jesus. For though we are beheaded, and crucified, and exposed to beasts and chains and fire and all other forms of torture, it is plain that we do not forsake

the confession of our faith, but the more things of this kind which happen to us the more are there others who become believers ... through the name of Jesus.

Tertullian commented, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." In the words of Spurgeon, "Never did the church so much prosper and so truly thrive as when she was baptized in the blood. The ship of the church never sails so gloriously along as when the bloody spray of her martyrs falls on her deck. We must suffer and we must die, if we are ever to conquer this world for Christ." Robert Murray McCheyne summed it up: "We do not know the value of Christ, if we will not cleave to Him unto death!"

Hear the words of Jesus. He has told us that to follow Him will be costly. He says in Matthew 10:26-28, *"So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops. And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell."* See with an eternal perspective. Christ is your life. Set your mind on things above. Colossians 3:1-4, *"If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."*

Speak with a holy boldness. This word "witnesses" in Acts 1:8 is literally "*martureo*"; it's the word from which we get our word "martyr." Acts 1:8, *"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."* 2 Timothy 1:8-12,

Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, for which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, which is why I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me.

So, see with an eternal perspective, speak with a holy boldness, and sacrifice with reckless abandonment. Lose your life, Jesus says, and find it. Matthew 10:38-39, *"And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."*

In view of Christ and heaven and hell, may loyalty to God be more important to us than life itself, and may mission in the world be more important to us than maintenance in our churches. We must make sacrifices in our churches and our programs and our priorities. We cannot do business as usual while people plunge into hell all around us and among all the nations. His commission is clear. Matthew 28:18-20, *"And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'"* His commission is costly. Matthew 24:9-14,

"Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."

So, hear these words from John Piper; words that, I pray, will become reality in your heart tonight. He said, "When you know the truth about what happens to you after you die, and you believe it, and you are satisfied with all that God will be for you in the ages to come, that truth makes you free indeed. Free from the short, shallow, suicidal pleasures of sin, and free for the sacrifices of mission and ministry that cause people to give glory to our Father in heaven."

Oh, to all who came tonight thinking, "This is going to be great. We're going to have all kinds of charts and tables that tell us about when Jesus is going to come back," I want to be clear from the start: That is not the point. The point is not to give you charts tonight. The point is to give you truth that will compel to lay your life and your family and your possessions and your retirement and your dreams and your ambitions and your church down to make this eternal gospel known all around you and to the ends of the earth, no matter what it costs you.

We need to pray.

So, we need to pray. Matthew 9:36-38 says, *"When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like a sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.'"* We need to pray because our lives are at stake for eternity. Based on truth we're looking at tonight, I am certain that amidst 60,000 people gathered together tonight, some, likely many, are currently on a road that leads to an eternal hell. I want to pray that your eternal destiny changes because of the truth and the power and the love of God tonight.

We need to pray because our lives are at stake for eternity, and we need to pray because others' lives are at stake forever. The Day in Revelation 20:11-15 is coming. It says of this day,

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Is there anything more important than what we are diving into tonight?

So, let's pause, and I want to pray for us specifically along these lines. God in heaven, we pray tonight for clarity from your Word. We want to hear from you. O God, minimize my

thoughts and magnify your truth to the end that every single one of the 60,000 people who are a part of this night...to the end that each of us see our true spiritual condition before you. O God, as we listen with humility, we pray that you would save some...save many...from their sins tonight. Oh God, don't let people leave this night on a road that leads to hell.

Oh God, for all who know the security of eternal life with you...and we pray for that security and that hope to only increase among your people tonight...we pray that you would send us out from where we are sitting at this moment to spread the gospel of your eternal grace where we live and to the ends of the earth. O God, we pray that this night might have ripple effects in the world in the days and months and years to come through a people who love you more than life itself, through lives and through churches that are awakened from spiritual stupor on this Good Friday night to see the glory of Christ with fresh eyes, and to feel the urgency of eternity in a new way, that, ultimately, we might believe your Word and that we might live with death-defying boldness in this world. We pray these things in Jesus' name, Amen.

How We Plan to Proceed...

Okay, a light start to the night. So, here's how we plan to proceed. We'll start with the the fragility of life and the finality of death. Then, we'll move to the intermediate state. You may wonder, "What does that mean?" Well, just wait and you'll see. That will lead us to the return of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment, the horror of hell, the hope of heaven, and then as we approach midnight/1 AM/whatever your timezone is, we'll dive into three controversial questions in Revelation: What does this book mean and why do we have it? What is the millennium and when will it happen? What is the tribulation and who will experience it? We will solve all these questions, tonight, and then we'll close with seven critical conclusions from Revelation. Sound good?

The Fragility of Life and the Finality of Death Eight General Foundations...

Life is precious.

All right, let's start, then, with the fragility of life and the finality of death. Open fire hydrant, here we go. Eight general foundations about life and death. Number one: Life is precious. Every one of us created by God, knit together by God as the height of His creation. There are many passages that give an idea of the preciousness of life. Genesis 1:26-31 says,

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have

them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Genesis 2:7-9,

...then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature. And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Job 10:11-12 says, "You clothed me with skin and flesh, and knit me together with bones and sinews. You have granted me life and steadfast love, and your care has preserved my spirit." Psalm 22:9-10, "Yet you are he who took me from the womb; you made me trust you at my mother's breasts. On you was I cast from my birth, and from my mother's womb you have been my God." Also, Psalm 139:13-16 says,

For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.

Life is valuable.

Life is valuable; every life is valuable. Your life, the life of every child, every man and woman made created and known by the Lord from the womb. Psalm 8:3-8 says,

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

Isaiah 49:1, "Listen to me, O coastlands, and give attention, you peoples from afar. The LORD called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name." Jeremiah 1:5 says, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." Galatians 1:15-16, "But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone..."

Life is fleeting.

Your life is valuable and precious, but it is also fleeting. Life is fleeting. Psalm 39:4-5 says, "O LORD, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting I am! Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing before you. Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath!" Psalm 102:11, "My days are like an evening shadow; I wither away like grass." Psalm 103:15-16, "As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more." James 4:13-14, "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit' - yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes." Don't be fooled, ladies and gentlemen. You are a mist that is here for an instant and is gone.

Death is coming.

As valuable and as precious as your life is, it is also fleeting, which leads to this next truth: Death is coming. Second Samuel 14:14a says, "We must all die; we are like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again." Psalm 90:10, "The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away." Ecclesiastes 9:2-5 says,

It is the same for all, since the same event happens to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice. As the good one is, so is the sinner, and he who swears is as he who shuns an oath. This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all. Also, the hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead. But he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten.

Jonathan Edwards, in his resolutions, wrote that he was, "Resolved, to think much, on all occasions, of my own dying, and of the common circumstances which attend death."

Now some people hear that and think, "What a miserable way to live, to always think about dying. Why live like that?" Here's why: Because you need to be reminded on a daily basis that your house and your car and your bank account and your health and your nice job and your comfortable life guarantee you nothing in this world. We cling to the things of this world in vain. D.A. Carson said, "Whatever the church does, it should prepare its members to face death and meet God."

Death is often sudden.

Death is coming to us all, and the reality is death is often sudden. Jesus makes this exact point in Luke 13:1-5 when He references two groups of people who died unexpectedly and tragically. The passage says,

There were some present at that very time who told him about Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners from all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower of Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than

all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

Jesus is saying, "This same thing could happen to you." Millions upon millions of people have died in natural disasters: Tornadoes, cyclones, earthquakes. Others like my dad or Heather's mom have died as a result of heart attacks or sudden brain clots, and virtually none of them woke up on those days thinking, "This could be the last."

Death is often surprising.

Death is often sudden, and death is often surprising. The reality is, I am not and you are not guaranteed to make it through this night. Do we realize this?

Death is inevitably sure.

Death is often sudden, death is often surprising, but death is inevitably sure. The current death rate in the world is 100 percent. Over 150,000 people die every day in the world. John Piper said, "One hundred [people] are dying [every] minute. If you could hear them all, you'd hear so many screams you'd go insane. Only God can hear them all and not go insane. God parcels out our awareness in small amounts lest we go under. How can you live in a world like that as a loving person and rejoice in the Lord?"

Death is tragic.

See in all of this that death is tragic. This is not the way it's supposed to be. God created man and woman in Genesis 2:15-17 to live. The passage says, *"The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, 'You may surely eat of every tree in the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.'"* However, then as a result of sin, by the end of Genesis 3, we have a picture of death. Genesis 3:22-24 says,

Then the LORD God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever -" therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.

Death is a consequence of sin.

This is tragic. It is a tragic consequence of sin. In Genesis 3...and the picture only gets worse as you get to the flood in Genesis 6. Genesis 6:13 says, *"And God said to Noah, 'I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence through them. Behold, I will destroy them with the earth.'"* The wrath of God upon man in his death is further described in Psalm 90:5-9. It says,

You sweep them away as with a flood; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning; in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers. For we are brought to an end by your anger; by your wrath we are dismayed. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence. For all our days pass away under your wrath; we bring our years to an end like a sigh.

Also, Romans 5:12 says, *"Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned..."*

This is key, particularly for Christians. Obviously, we are going to talk about victory over death in Christ, but this does not mean that death in and of itself is to be celebrated. Death is a tragic consequence of sin in our lives and sin in this world. Even as Christians, we don't love funerals. No, we are frustrated to live in a world of funeral homes and abortion clinics and electric chairs.

Death is a tool of Satan.

Death is a tragic consequence of sin in this world, and death is a tool of Satan. Hebrews 2:14-15 says, *"Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery."* This describes Satan as the devil who has the power of death.

Death is multi-faceted.

Now, it's at this point that we need to realize that death is multi-faceted. Meaning, the Bible talks about death in different ways. Listen to Jesus in Matthew 10:28. Jesus says, *"And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell."* So, you see a difference here between the death of the body and the death of the soul.

In a similar way, Ecclesiastes 12:7 says, *"...and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it."* James 2:26 says, *"For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead."* Both of these reference the difference between our physical bodies and our spirit, so we need to understand the different ways that the Bible talks about death.

On one hand, the Bible talks about spiritual death which is the separation of a person from God. Spiritual death. When man and woman sinned in Genesis 3:22-24, they were immediately separated from the presence of God that they once enjoyed. That passage says,

Then the LORD God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever -" therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.

Later, when you get to Ezekiel 18, you see the Bible talk about how the soul that sins shall die, but the soul that turns away from sin shall not die. Ezekiel 18:4 says, *"Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die."* It continues in Ezekiel 18:21: *"But if a wicked person turns away from all his sins that he has committed and keeps all my statutes and does what is just and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die."* That's clearly not talking about physical death, but spiritual death, separation from God.

But then, obviously, the Bible does talk about physical death: The cessation of life in our physical body. Physical death. Soon after sin in Genesis 3, we have record of people dying, physically. Genesis 5:1-8 says,

This is the book of the generations of Adam. When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them Man when they were created. When Adam had

lived 130 years, he fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth. The days of Adam after he fathered Seth were 800 years; and he had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days that Adam lived were 930 years, and he died. When Seth had lived 105 years, he fathered Enosh. Seth lived after he fathered Enosh 807 years and had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days of Seth were 912 years, and he died.

But then, don't miss this: There is one other way that the Bible refers to death, and that's eternal death: The finalization of separation from God. Eternal death. Revelation 21:8 says, *"But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death."* Revelation 20:6 also says, *"Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years."* When those who are spiritually separated from God physically die, that leads to eternal death: The finalization of spiritual separation from God.

Four Gospel Exhortations...

The bad news: Death is our universal enemy.

So, follow this: The Bible talks about spiritual life and death, physical life and death, and eternal life and death. Now, put these eight general foundations together into four gospel exhortations. First, here's the bad news. The bad news: Death is our universal enemy. First Corinthians 15:26, *"The last enemy to be destroyed is death."* Death is our enemy. The Bible teaches that we are all spiritually dead. Born dead in our trespasses and sin. Every one of us has turned away from God to ourselves, and we are spiritually dead in our sin. All of us, and when the Bible says "dead" here, it doesn't mean "kind of dead" or "sort of dead" or "almost dead"; it means "dead." Lifeless. Without life. Ephesians 2:1-3 says,

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience - among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

We are all, in and of ourselves, spiritually dead, and we will all experience physical death. *"For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive,"* 1 Corinthians 15:22. As a result of our sin, the Bible teaches we all deserve eternal death. Spiritually dead, destined to physically die, and we deserve eternal death. This is what Romans 6:23 is talking about when it says, *"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."* So, this is bad news. Eternally bad news.

The good news: Death has been ultimately defeated.

But here's the good news, and it's why we call this day Good Friday. The good news is that death has been ultimately defeated. First Corinthians 15:54-57 says, *"When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."*

The gospel is the good news that Jesus has lived the life we could not live. Jesus has lived the life...spiritual life as a physical man...that we could not live. John 18:38 says, *"Pilate said to him, 'What is truth?' After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, 'I find no guilt in him.'"* Hebrews 4:15 says, *"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin."* 1 John 3:5, *"You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin."* A life of perfect, total obedience to God without sin and without separation from God. But then, on Good Friday 2000 years ago, He died, which begs the question: If death is the penalty for sin, and Jesus had no sin, then why did Jesus die? I'm glad you asked.

Jesus has died the death we deserve to die. He died in our place. Hebrews 2:17, *"Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people."* Romans 5:6-8, *"For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person - though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die - but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."* Galatians 3:13, *"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us - for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'..."* 1 Peter 2:24, *"He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed."* Second Corinthians 5:21, *"For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."* He died for us; He paid the price of spiritual, eternal death, in our place on our behalf.

But that is not the end of the story. Jesus has lived the life we could not live, He has died the death we deserve to die, and Jesus has conquered the enemy we cannot conquer. He has risen from the grave, in victory over sin and death. First Corinthians 15:3-8 says,

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

Hebrews 2:14-15, *"Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and he deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery."* Colossians 2:13-15, *"And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him."*

Oh, hear this; hear this: This is the answer to the greatest problem in your life, whether you think this is your greatest problem or not. How can you, as a sinner, spiritually dead and deserving of eternal death, be made right with a holy God? You are separated from Him, and no amount of good you do, no matter how hard you try, can nullify the reality that you are separated from God. But God loves you. He created you precious and valuable in His sight, and even though you have sinned, He has sent His Son as a sacrifice for you, so that you can be saved forever. So that, when you die, and when you face judgment for your sin

before a holy God, the price for that sin will already have been paid, and by faith in Christ, you will stand before God not condemned in your sin, but cleansed of your sin, and you will live with Him forever and ever.

The decisive question ...

So, then, the decisive question is clear for every single person listening to my voice and every single person in all of history. Romans 10:9-10 says, *"If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved."* Your eternal life or death hinge around this question: Will you turn from Jesus? Will you turn from Him? Will you choose to live without Christ now, and in so doing, will you choose to die without Christ forever? Second Thessalonians 1:7b-8 says *"...when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus."* Romans 6:16, *"Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?"* Second Thessalonians 1:9-10, *"They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed."*

It doesn't make sense. If you are spiritually separated from God when you physically die, whether that's tonight or later this year or ten years from now, you will die separated from the only One who can reconcile you to God and give you eternal spiritual life. Apart from Jesus, what will you have staked your life on that will save you on that day you die? Your money? Your job? Your health? The awards you've received? The goals you've achieved? Oh, I urge you, don't put your eternal hope in the temporal things of this world.

See it; see it! For the non-Christian, for the man or woman who turns from Christ, death remains an eternally dreaded enemy. Revelation 20:12-15 says,

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

So will you turn from Jesus, or will you trust in Jesus? Will you trust in the One who loves you and gave Himself for you? Galatians 2:20 says, *"I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."* Will you die with Christ now? Meaning, turn from your sin and yourself, die to your sin and yourself and confess that you need Christ to save you from your sin and yourself and restore you to God to give you new life. Romans 6:5-11 says,

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection life like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been

set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Will you die with Christ now, and live with Christ forever? By faith in Him, His life becomes your life. John 11:25, "Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live...'" His eternal life becomes your eternal life, and when this happens...oh, see it...when this happens for the Christian, death becomes a surprisingly helpful friend. Luke 23:39-43 says,

One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Just as it was for a thief on a cross two thousand years ago to whom Jesus said, "You're about to die, but today you will be with me in paradise." Just as Stephen, even as he was being stoned, looked up into heaven and looked forward to being with Christ there. Acts 7:56 says, "And he said, 'Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.'" Just as Paul said in Philippians 1:20-23,

...as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.

I think often about Casey, a member of this church, the epitome of health on the outside. Muscular, fit, worked out, ate well, had a wife and daughter, and one day a few years ago, right before Thanksgiving, his stomach started hurting, and it didn't stop for a couple of weeks, so he went to the doctor. They ran some tests, and they discovered cancer in his stomach. They planned a day to operate, and they opened up his stomach, and there the doctor saw cancer that had spread throughout his entire body, so much so that the doctor didn't do anything. He closed Casey's stomach back up, and when Casey woke up, the doctor told him, his wife, and his little girl, "It's too much. There is absolutely nothing we can do." Within a couple of weeks, Casey's life was gone.

I remember when I got the call that Casey was in the hospital and would likely not make it through the day, I went to the hospital with a member of his small group. As I rode to the hospital, I kept thinking to myself, "What am I going to say? What do you say?" Do you say, "I'm so sorry this has happened to you, Casey. I wish this wasn't the case."?

But people who came to Casey's hospital room that day were quite surprised by what they saw. You see, when you walked into Casey's hospital room that day, you saw a man sitting on his deathbed with a genuine, authentic smile on his face. As soon as you walked in, he'd point up to heaven, and he'd say, "I'm going to be with Jesus today." All of the sudden, "I'm so sorry" just didn't seem appropriate anymore. Neither did, "I wish this wasn't the case."

You actually walked out of that hospital room that day a bit jealous, thinking, "I want to go with him." You see, for Casey Black and for everyone who has truly trusted in Jesus, you know that, because you've put your faith in the One who conquered death, you have nothing left to fear.

The definitive conclusion ...

Oh, don't turn from Jesus; turn to Jesus. I urge you tonight, if you have never done so, turn to Jesus. But regardless of what decision you make, hear this, the definitive conclusion: Death is not the end. Hebrews 9:27 says, "*And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment...*" *"After that..."* There is more after death, the Bible makes clear. Death is only the beginning. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, right before he was executed by the Nazi regime, wrote in his journal, "Oh, God, this is the end; for me the beginning of life." The rest of this evening, we're going to explore what happens after death, after this mist, this brief breath called life.

The Intermediate State

That leads us to the intermediate state. So, what happens the moment we die, not according to four and seven-year old boys, but according to God? Second Corinthians 5:1-10 most clearly describes an answer to this question, saying,

For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

This text leads us to discussion of what is commonly referred to as the "intermediate state". This is a term used to describe the condition.

A Definition...

The intermediate state refers to the condition of people between their bodily death and their bodily resurrection. So, we're going to talk in a few minutes about a day that is coming in the future when our bodies will be resurrected with Christ. But we know that when someone dies, we bury their bodies in the ground. But where is their soul? What are they, and what are they doing? Many, if not all of you, have, at some point, buried a friend or a family member. So, where is that person now? What is that person doing? Does that person know what we're doing? What does the Bible teach us about all these things?

Well, follow with me. Revelation 6 gives us a picture of people who were slain, i.e., persecuted and killed, in this world for their faith. Revelation pictures them around the throne of God, crying out to God. Listen to Revelation 6:9-11:

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

All people possess both a body and a soul.

So, let's take some notes from this. First, notice...and remember that we've already talked about this...that all people possess both a body and a soul. Genesis 2:7 says, "...then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature." All of us have a body and a soul, and when we die, our bodies are buried. Ecclesiastes 12:7, "and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it."

But at the same time, when we die, our souls persist. Acts 7:59-60 talks about Stephen, and it says, "And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep." His body stopped breathing.

One day, our bodies will be resurrected and reunited with our souls.

So, all people possess both a body and a soul, and one day, our bodies will be resurrected and reunited with our souls. Multiple Scripture passages talk about this. Jesus talks in John 5:28-29 about a resurrection to come. It says, "Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment." Matthew 25:31-32 says, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats."

Acts 24:14-15 says, "But this I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets, having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust." Revelation 20:12, "And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done."

First Corinthians 15:35-40 talks about the bodily nature of this resurrection. It says,

But someone will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" You foolish person! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body that is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. For not all flesh is the same, but there is one kind for humans, another for animals, another for birds, and

another for fish. There are heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is of one kind, and the glory of the earthly is of another.

It continues a few verses later in 1 Corinthians 15:51-53,

Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality.

This is key. When we think about that moment of death, and particularly people we love who trusted in Christ going on to be with God, we need to realize that the story is still not over for them. The Bible teaches that there is still a day coming in the future when they will experience a full, final, and physical resurrection of their bodies, a bodily reuniting with their souls. That's why this time between now and the final resurrection is called an "intermediate" state, because it's not intended to last. There's still more to come, and this is our ultimate hope.

When I am talking with somebody who's lost a loved one who knew Christ, I'm going to tell that person that their loved one is with God spiritually, but I'm also going to tell them that their loved one's story is still not over. One day, their body will be resurrected physically, and their soul will one day be reunited with their body to enjoy God in the completion of their salvation. That day is still to come in the future.

Some Questions...

So what happens at the moment of death?

So, what happens, then, during this intermediate time? So, what happens at the moment of death? Luke 23:39-43 says,

One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Well, clearly, according to passages like Luke 23 and Jesus' words to the thief on the cross, as well as what we have already read from 2 Corinthians 5 and Philippians 1, as well as Hebrews 12, at the moment of death, the souls of believers immediately enter the presence of God. There is no biblical question about that. Second Corinthians 5:6-8 says, "So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord." Philippians 1:23 says, "I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better." Hebrews 12:22-24 says,

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the

assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Not only that, but at the moment of death, the souls of unbelievers immediately experience the punishment of God, which is clear in the story Jesus told about the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31.

"There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.' And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house—for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'"

What about purgatory?

Now at this point, people ask the question, "What about purgatory?" According to Catholicism, purgatory is the place where believers' souls go to be further purified from sin prior to admission into heaven. In other words, some people go to purgatory in order to pay remaining penalty for their sins and experience final purification from their sins. This doctrine is taught in 2 Maccabees 12:42-45:

[Judas Maccabeus, the leader of the Jewish forces] also took a collection, man by man, to the amount of 2,000 drachmas of silver, and sent it to Jerusalem to provide for a sin offering. In doing this he acted very well and honorably, taking into account the resurrection. For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Therefore he made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin.

Here, it's clear that it's right and good to pray for the dead, and even to make atonement for the dead, or offerings for the dead, in order that they might be delivered from their sin. According to Catholicism, in purgatory, the penalty of venial, which means pardonable, sins can be removed by unconditional forgiveness from God, contrition or works of penance by souls in purgatory. In addition, souls in purgatory can be helped in the process of

purification by saints on earth through their participation in mass, prayers, giving, alms and performing good works.

This has been taught and defended in various church councils, which speak authoritatively for the Catholic church, throughout the history of the Catholic church. According to the Council of Florence, which, remember, these councils are authoritative, on the same level of Scripture in Catholicism...so, according to the Council of Florence, "Souls are cleansed by purgatorial pains after death, and in order that they may be rescued from these pains, they are benefitted by the suffrages of the living faith, viz: the sacrifice of the Mass, prayers, alms, and other works of piety."

So, this is what Catholicism teaches, but what does Scripture have to say? Well, according to Scripture, there is a blank space, because there is absolutely no mention whatsoever of purgatory in the Bible. Nowhere does Jesus say anything about it, and nowhere does the New Testament or Old Testament talk about it.

But where the Bible's silent about purgatory, the Bible is clear about salvation. We are saved from our sins by grace alone. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, "*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*" The whole doctrine of purgatory teaches that there is some payment that we must dole out for our sins in order to be restored to God, which is a fundamental denial of the entire gospel in the first place. Any thought of atonement that we make for our sins before or after death undercuts the atonement that Christ alone has made for our sins, and as a result, any teaching that posits a period of atonement for sins after death must be summarily renounced and rejected based on the gospel.

We are saved from our sins by grace alone through faith alone. Not by our works; not in this life and not in our death. Galatians 3:1-14 says,

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith—just as Abraham "believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"?

Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed." So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them." Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith." But the law is not of faith, rather "The one who does them shall live by them." Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.

We are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. The very doctrine of purgatory implies that Christ's death was not sufficient to cover our sins, and so there's more need for covering sin after we die, and it's not true. Christ's death is sufficient to cover sin: All of it. Christ's death is sufficient to save us from all of our sin in life and in death. First Timothy 2:5-6, *"For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time."*

What about soul sleep?

Well, what about soul sleep? According to some, believers who die enter into a state of unconscious existence, and they stay unconscious until Christ returns and raises them to eternal life. This would be a common belief among Seventh-Day Adventists as well as Jehovah's Witnesses. In the "Fundamental Beliefs" of Seventh-Day Adventists, it says, "The condition of man in death is one of unconsciousness [and] all men, good and evil alike, remain in the grave from death to the resurrection."

They believe this because, they say, "After all, even Jesus describes death as sleep." Matthew 9:24 says, *"...he said, 'Go away, for the girl is not dead but sleeping.' And they laughed at him."* Then, there are other instances in the New Testament where death is described as sleep. Stephen, in Acts 7:60, *"And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' And when he had said this, he fell asleep."* Acts 13:36, *"For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep and was laid with his fathers and saw corruption..."* 1 Thessalonians 5:9-10, *"For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him."*

So, what are we to do with these verses? Well, think about it. According to Scripture, sleep is clearly, indisputably, without question a metaphor intended to depict the temporary nature of death for Christians. Look at what Jesus said about Lazarus in John 11:11-13: *"After saying these things, he said to them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him.' The disciples said to him, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover.' Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep."* Notice that Jesus doesn't say, "The soul of Lazarus is sleeping," nor does any other passage in Scripture ever say that someone's soul is sleeping or even unconscious. The point Jesus is making is, "Lazarus is dead, but only temporarily."

Then, you look in the rest of Scripture, and you see that believers in heaven are clearly not sleeping. Psalm 115:17-18 says, *"The dead do not praise the LORD, nor do any who go down into silence. But we will bless the LORD from this time forth and forevermore. Praise the LORD!"* We bless the Lord forever. Moses and Elijah are clearly not asleep in Matthew 17:1-3. It says, *"And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him."*

Jesus told the thief on the cross not, "Today, you'll get a long nap," but, "Today you'll be with me in paradise," and then you have the passage from Revelation 6:9-11, which clearly shows believers awake in the presence of God. It says,

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" Then

they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

What are believers doing in the intermediate heaven?

That then leads to the question, "Well, then if they are awake, then what are believers doing in the intermediate heaven?" Scripture doesn't give us a lot of specifics on this. Remember in questions like this and in many questions like this that we'll look at tonight, the point of the Bible is not to satisfy our curiosity about every question under the sun. The purpose of the Bible is to show us who God is and how we can know Him through Christ. But at the same time, we do have glimpses here and there that at least inform the way we think about these questions.

So, if you put Revelation 6 together with other passages in Revelation as well as Hebrews and other parts of Scripture, we at least get some idea of what believers are doing in the intermediate heaven. What are the saints, our loved ones in Christ who have gone before us, what are they doing in this intermediate time? Scripture seems to indicate that they are worshiping. Hebrews 12:22-24 talks about how when we gather together for worship on earth, we are joining together with a heavenly assembly around the throne. It says,

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Also, Revelation 19:1-5 says,

After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, crying out, "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just; for he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality, and has avenged on her the blood of his servants." Once more they cried out, "Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up forever and ever." And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who was seated on the throne, saying, "Amen. Hallelujah!" And from the throne came a voice saying, "Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him, small and great."

According to Hebrews and Revelation, in some sense, they are watching. It seems they can see, at least to some extent, what is happening on earth. They surround us as a great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us. Hebrews 12:1 says, *"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us..."*

Even Luke 15:7 doesn't just say that there's rejoicing by angels over sinners who repent, but there's rejoicing in heaven in the presence of angels over sinners who repent. Revelation 18:20 depicts an exhortation for the saints and apostles and prophets in heaven to rejoice as they watch what is taking place on earth. It says, *"Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you saints and apostles and prophets, for God has given judgment for you against her!"*

So, they are, in some sense, worshiping, watching, and they are waiting. This is the picture, certainly, of the saints in Revelation 6:9-11.

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

When you read that text, you can reasonably come to a number of conclusions. One, at the very least, these saints are clearly conscious of who they are, who God is, and what is going on in the world. They are audibly loud, raising their voices. They are emotionally passionate. They are distinctly individual. This group of martyred saints is each given a robe, Revelation 6 says. They are completely unified, calling out with one voice. They are continually interceding. The picture here is them asking God to intervene on earth and to act on their behalf for His glory.

They're praying for judgment upon persecutors who are attacking the church. They're interceding for suffering saints on earth. You think about it: If prayer is communication with God, then you would think that we'll pray more, not less, when our souls are actually united with God. As they intercede, they thirst for final justice. Their thirst for true justice is greater and deeper and more zealous than it ever was on earth. They long for full redemption and restoration.

In all of this, they know God's character more deeply. They see God's attributes in ways that make His judgment of sin all the more understandable. They know God's character more deeply, and they love God's church more fully. See the references there in Revelation 6 to their fellow servants and their brothers on earth, the familial tie that is there. In the middle of all this, they are trusting God's promises in the present, and they are anticipating God's plan for the future. They live in anticipation of the fulfillment of God's redemptive plan. This unfolding drama of redemption in the earth is playing out before them on center court, center stage, and they are worshiping, watching, and waiting for the day when, Revelation 7:9-10 says, *"After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'"*

How then should we view our own death?

So, bring this back down to us, then, and ask the question: "How then should we view our own death?" Well, as we've already discussed, it depends on who we are. All who follow Christ should anticipate death with confidence. The Psalmist says in Psalm 23:4, *"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me."* Christian, we don't fear death; we anticipate death because we know that it will not separate us from the love of God. Romans 8:37-39, *"No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

Death is better by far. Philippians 1:19-23,

...for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and

hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.

Because the one who has the power of death has been destroyed. Hebrews 2:14-15, *"Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery."*

On the other hand, all who do not follow Christ should fear death with trepidation. Fear the day when your separation from God will become an eternal reality. Luke 16:22-28 gives a chilling picture of a rich man who had it all in this world, but died apart from Christ. It says,

"The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.' And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house—for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.'"

For all who do not follow Christ, fear death with trepidation.

How should we view the deaths of others?

How should we view others' death? This is so key. Russell Moore said, "At a funeral the church is perhaps at its most theological." So, how should we view the death of non-Christians? This is my encouragement to us in light of what we've seen in God's Word. First, view the death of non-Christians with biblical honesty. This is so key, because it so common in our day to go to funerals, especially here in the religious south, and no matter how somebody has lived, no matter how they have spurned Christ with the way they lived their life, all of a sudden, it seems like everybody becomes a universalist. All of the sudden, people are talking like everybody ends up in heaven, but as we've seen, it's not true. Those who die with Christ immediately enter into the presence of God, and those who die without Christ immediately experience the punishment of God. View the death of non-Christians with biblical honesty. Second Thessalonians 1:5-9 says,

This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering—since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might...

Now, at the same time, obviously, no one but God ultimately knows the state of a person's heart, so view the death of non-Christians with personal humility. Knowing that, like the thief on the cross in the last moments of his life, maybe they trusted in Christ, even in their last minutes they trusted in Christ. Luke 23:43, *"And he said to him, 'Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'"*

View the death of non-Christians with appropriate honor. Obviously, in no way would we ever denigrate someone in their death. Even the worst of people, as we've already seen, are created precious and valuable in the sight of God. See David's example of this in talking about Saul's death in 2 Samuel 1:19-25:

"Your glory, O Israel, is slain on your high places! How the mighty have fallen! Tell it not in Gath, publish it not in the streets of Ashkelon, lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice, lest the daughters of the uncircumcised exult. You mountains of Gilboa, let there be no dew or rain upon you, nor fields of offerings! For there the shield of the mighty was defiled, the shield of Saul, not anointed with oil. From the blood of the slain, from the fat of the mighty, the bow of Jonathan turned not back, and the sword of Saul returned not empty. Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely! In life and in death they were not divided; they were swifter than eagles; they were stronger than lions. You daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, who clothed you luxuriously in scarlet, who put ornaments of gold on your apparel. How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle! Jonathan lies slain on your high places."

So, we view their death with appropriate honor and with heart-breaking anguish over the death of a sinner separated from God; the kind of anguish we see in Paul in Romans 9:1-3: *"I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit—that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh."*

Ultimately, we view the death of non-Christians with life-giving resolve, to urgently spend our lives spreading the gospel to others like them before it is too late. May the death of non-Christians be a wake-up call in our lives. Hear these words for Jim Elliot, himself martyred by men he was trying to reach with the gospel. He said:

"Surely those who know the great passionate heart of Jehovah must deny their own loves to share in the expression of His. Consider the call from the Throne above, 'Go ye,' and from round about, 'Come over and help us,' and even the call from the damned souls below, 'Send Lazarus to my brothers, that they come not to this place.' Impelled, then, by these voices, I dare not stay home while Quichuas perish. So what if the well-fed church in the homeland needs stirring? They have the Scriptures, Moses, and the Prophets, and a whole lot more. Their condemnation is written on their bank books and in the dust on their Bible covers. American believers have sold their lives to the service of Mammon, and God has His rightful way of dealing with those who succumb to the spirit of Laodicea."

God, wake us up with the call from above, the call from around us, and even the call from damned souls below. Send somebody to my friends and family.

Then, how should we view the death of Christians? The Bible encourages us to view the death of Christian brothers and sisters with profound sorrow. Oh, don't miss or

misunderstand this. To have confidence in the gospel does not mean that we are glibly happy when a brother or sister in Christ dies. No, we are profoundly sorrowful, and we weep, just as Jesus wept, knowing that death is a result of sin in a fallen world, and we hate sin, so we hate death.

Multiple places in Scripture speak to this. John 11:35 says, "*Jesus wept.*" Acts 7:56-8:2,

And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep. And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him.

Acts 20:36-38, "*And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship.*" Also, Philippians 2:25-27, "*I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need, for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. Indeed he was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow.*"

But at the same time, we view their death with abiding joy, because this brother or sister knew the King who had conquered death, and even though they died, John 11:25, even now they live. So, in a strange paradox of affections, we grieve with joy. John 16:20-24,

"Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. In that day you will ask nothing of me. Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full."

John 16:33, "*I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.*" Psalm 116:15, "*Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints.*" Also, Revelation 14:13, "*And I heard a voice from heaven saying, 'Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.' 'Blessed indeed,' says the Spirit, 'that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!'*"

It was said by the apologist Aristedes in 125 AD, "If any righteous man among the Christians passes from this world, they rejoice and offer thanks to God, and they escort his

body with songs and thanksgiving as if he were setting out from one place to another nearby."

We view the death of Christians with sincere worship to God. Our weeping is mixed with our worship, just like it was in David's life when his child died, and Job's life when his children died. Second Samuel 12:19-20, in regards to David, says,

But when David saw that his servants were whispering together, David understood that the child was dead. And David said to his servants, "Is the child dead?" They said, "He is dead." Then David arose from the earth and washed and anointed himself and changed his clothes. And he went into the house of the LORD and worshiped. He then went to his own house. And when he asked, they set food before him, and he ate.

Also, Job 1:18-22 says,

While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, "Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house, and behold, a great wind came across the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young people, and they are dead, and I alone have escaped to tell you." Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. And he said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD." In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.

So, we weep in worship.

We view the death of Christians with sincere worship to God and with unshakeable hope in God and before others, because we know this world is not all there is. We grieve with hope. And this is our hope, Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18,

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

The Return of Christ

Which leads us right into our next section, "The Return of Christ." Picking up right where we left off thematically, the author of Hebrews writes in Hebrews 9:27-28, "And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him."

Scripture is clear that the decisive event which will bring about the culmination of all things...the end of the intermediate state, the final judgment, the final resurrection, and the end of the world, so to speak, the decisive event which will bring all of this about is the return of Christ. It is one of the clearest truths in all of Scripture.

What We Know...

Jesus is coming back.

So, what do we know? First, Jesus is coming back. This is the one of the most widely taught doctrines in all of the New Testament, and I've listed numerous references here that make clear: Jesus came once, and Jesus is coming back. Matthew 24:30-31, *"Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other."* After Jesus' ascension into heaven, the angels told the disciples in Acts 1:9-11,

And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Then, all throughout the rest of the New Testament, there is constant reference to His return. First Corinthians 1:4-8,

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge—even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you—so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Thessalonians 2:19-20, *"For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy."* 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13, *"Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints."* 1 Thessalonians 5:23, *"Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."*

Also, 2 Thessalonians 2:1, *"Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers..."* 1 Timothy 6:13-14, *"I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ..."* 2 Timothy 4:1-2, *"I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching."*

Second Timothy 4:8, *"Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing."* 1 Peter 1:13, *"Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ."* Also, 1 John 2:28, *"And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming."*

The New Testament ends in the book of Revelation with a threefold promise from Christ saying in Revelation 22:7, *"And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book."* Then, again, in Revelation 22:12, *"Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done."* And a third time in Revelation 22:20, *"He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!"* So, the Bible is clear that Jesus is coming back.

His return will be unexpected.

The Bible is also clear that Jesus' return will be unexpected. No one but God knows when Jesus will return. According to Jesus in Matthew 24:42-44, *"Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."* Also, Luke 12:40, *"You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."*

Paul and Peter both say this. Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:2 said, *"For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night."* 2 Peter 3:10, *"But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed."*

His return will be visible.

His return will be visible. Acts 1:9-11,

And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Also, Revelation 1:7 says, *"Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen."*

His return will be personal.

And His return will be personal. Jesus told His disciples in John 14:1-3, *"Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also."* Also, 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 says, *"For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord."* Again, in 1 John 3:2, *"Beloved, we are God's children now,*

and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is."

His return will be glorious.

He is coming back for His people, who Hebrews 9 said, are eagerly waiting for Him, and His return will be glorious. Matthew 25:31, *"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne."* Jesus came the first time lying in a manger; He will come the second time riding on the clouds. Psalm 104:3, *"He lays the beams of his chambers on the waters; he makes the clouds his chariot; he rides on the wings of the wind..."* Isaiah 19:1, *"Behold, the LORD is riding on a swift cloud and comes to Egypt; and the idols of Egypt will tremble at his presence, and the heart of the Egyptians will melt within them."* Also, Matthew 24:30 says, *"Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory."*

Jesus came the first time in humility to provide salvation; He will come the second time in glory to execute judgment. Matthew 25:32-33 says, *"Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left."*

What We Don't Know...

When is Jesus coming back?

So, these are things we know about Christ's return; truths that are clear across Scripture and agreed upon among Christians. But there are some things that we don't know that various followers of Christ who believe the Bible disagree upon. So, okay, we're down here in the tertiary doctrines now, things that we might agree to disagree about. You will get different answers from different Christians, different pastors, different theologians, when you ask the question: When is Jesus coming back? Obviously, as we've already noted, Scripture itself tells us that no one but the Father knows. Mark 13:32-33 tells us, *"But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come."* Also, Matthew 25:13, *"Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."* Acts 1:6-7 says, *"So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?' He said to them, 'It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority.'"*

But at the same time, many passages in Scripture talk about certain events that will happen before Christ returns, certain signs that will be fulfilled. This has led all kinds of people to take the Bible and try to figure out little details about what or when or where this or that is going to happen. Some have taken their conclusions and predicted exact dates for when Jesus is going to come back.

I remember when I was younger hearing about a book called, "88 Reasons Why Christ is Returning in 1988." What do you do if you're celebrating New Year's Day with that guy in 1989? What do you say to him? "Happy New Year" just doesn't seem appropriate. You may remember Harold Camping predicting that the world would end on Saturday, May 21, 2011. When that didn't happen, he changed his prediction to October 21, 2011; he had made a slight miscalculation. Come October 22, I think it was time for Harold to hang things up.

What signs have been fulfilled?

But this is not just crazy people. There is, in a sense, in all of us as Christians a good and healthy and biblical anticipation of Jesus' return that sees what Scripture says about things that will happen before Christ returns, and we start to ask the question: What signs have been fulfilled? When we look in Scripture at what Christ and the New Testament teach about what will or must happen before the return of Christ, we see things like the preaching of the gospel to all nations in conversations about His return. Jesus says in Mark 13:9-10, *"But be on your guard. For they will deliver you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them. And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations."* A reality that is reiterated in Matthew 24:14, *"And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."*

So, has this happened or not? Well, it depends on how you understand all nations, and how you interpret the specific context behind Jesus' words in Mark 13 and Matthew 24. Some people would say it was preached to all nations in the first century, and many would say that the gospel has still not been preached in all nations. If that's the case, then does that mean that Jesus could not, or will not, come back today?

Then, you see the New Testament talk about the great tribulation, a subject we'll dive into in even greater detail later in the night. Jesus talked about suffering that would, according to Mark 13, be the beginning of birth pains, and then he said later in verses 7-8, *"And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. This must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. These are but the beginning of the birth pains."* He continues a few verses later in verses 19-20, *"For in those days there will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, and never will be. And if the Lord had not cut short the days, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he shortened the days."*

He says the same thing in Matthew 24:15-22, right after the words we just read above,

"So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house, and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak. And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath. For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short."

So, has this happened? Has there been a great tribulation like this? Are we in a great tribulation like this? Jesus also talked about false prophets and miracle workers who would come in the days preceding His return, some claiming to be the Christ themselves. So, have such false prophets and miracle workers come on the scene of human history? Is this a general reference to false prophets and teachers, or a specific reference to certain false prophets and teachers? Mark 13:22-23 says, *"For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. But be on guard; I have told you all things beforehand."* Then, again, in Matthew 23-24, Jesus says, *"Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There he is!' do not believe it. For false*

christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect."

Then, Jesus talked about signs in the heavens that would precede His coming. Hear His words in Mark 13:24-26: *"But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory."* The same teaching in Matthew 24:29-30:

"Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory."

Also, Luke 21:25-27 says, *"And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory."*

So, has this happened? Is this to be understood literally or symbolically? Then, the Bible talks about the coming of the antichrist, the man of lawlessness or sin or rebellion. Listen to 2 Thessalonians 2:1-10:

Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming. The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.

So, what does this mean and who is this talking about? Throughout the history of the church, including the recent history of the Western church, in particular, there have been many attempts to identify who the antichrist is. During the Protestant Reformation, many reformers believed that the pope was the antichrist. Others have said Hitler was, or Napoleon, or Mussolini. In the 1980s, it was the Soviet Union, led by Mikhail Gorbachev, and the mark of the beast was that thing on his head.

But amidst all our speculation, we need to see clearly the antichrist, particularly in relation to Christ. Some Christians believe this will be a specific person, other Christians believe this

is symbolic of a particular system or government, even the world system that is set up against Christ, and in the end, that's the point. When you look at what Scripture says about this man of lawlessness and sin and rebellion, you see that he...or it, whoever or whatever is meant by this...is directly opposed to Christ.

Think about it: The New Testament teaches that the Spirit of Christ is on Christians as a guarantee of His future coming. We know this from a couple of passages. Romans 8:23 says, *"And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies."* Ephesians 1:13-14 says, *"In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory."*

But when the Bible talks about the antichrist, we learn that the spirit of the antichrist is in the world as a guarantee of his future coming. John writes in 1 John 4:2-3: *"By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already."*

Similarly, the Christ was preceded and accompanied by a true prophet: John the Baptist. Matthew 3:1-3 says, *"In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.' For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.'"*

Likewise, the Bible teaches the antichrist will be preceded and accompanied by a false prophet. Listen, again, to John, both in 1 John and in Revelation. He writes in 1 John 2:18, *"Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour."* Then, many people believe the first beast spoken of in Revelation 13:11-18 is the antichrist, and the second beast is a false prophet that encourages devotion to the antichrist. It says,

Then I saw another beast rising out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon. It exercises all the authority of the first beast in its presence, and makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound was healed. It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in front of people, and by the signs that it is allowed to work in the presence of the beast it deceives those who dwell on earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that was wounded by the sword and yet lived. And it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast might even speak and might cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be slain. Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, so that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name. This calls for wisdom: let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is 666.

To keep going, the Bible teaches that the Christ, obviously, speaks truth. John 8:31-32 says, *"So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, 'If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.'"* But the antichrist spreads deception. Again, now 2 John 7 says, *"For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the*

deceiver and the antichrist.” Revelation 13:13-14 that we read above, says, “It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in front of people, and by the signs that it is allowed to work in the presence of the beast it deceives those who dwell on earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that was wounded by the sword and yet lived.”

The Christ builds the temple, the church, of which He is the cornerstone. Ephesians 2:19-22,

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

Then, the antichrist stands in the temple, claiming to be its center, which we read about just a minute ago in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4: *“Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.”* So, how you understand who or what the antichrist is obviously factors into your understanding of when Jesus will return, for the coming of the antichrist will precede His return.

Then, you have the salvation of Israel addressed as a sign to be fulfilled, some believe, before the return of Christ; others believe during a millennial reign of Christ. Romans 11 seems to indicate a massive ingathering of the Jewish people who believe in Jesus as Messiah. Romans 11:11-12 states, *“So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!”* It goes on a few verses later in Romans 11:25-27, and says,

Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written, “The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob”; “and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins.”

So, when will this happen, and how does this relate to the return of Christ? It’s at this point, I want to be clear that we could spend an entire Secret Church and then some talking about the salvation of Israel and the role of Israel in the end times. But in light of the breadth and depth of some of these more general categories, we just don’t have time to do so. I realize that some may be disappointed by that, and you can’t hardly fathom even thinking about the end of the world without factoring in the role of Israel in this, and in a sense, that’s true, which is why I want to bring this to light here. But I also want to make clear that there is much question among Christians about who Israel is and what role Israel plays in all of this, and in the end, I believe it’s more than possible for us to dive into all of the issues we’re looking at tonight without trying to solve all the questions about Israel.

So, here’s my summary at this point. First, all Christians believe in a future for Israel. That is certain. Yet, at the same time many Christians disagree on the identity of Israel. Are the

promises for Israel that we see in the Old Testament and New Testament, particularly in relationship to end times...are these promises a reference to an ethnic people, the Jewish people scattered around the world? Or, are these references to a national state? There's no question that since Israel's independence was declared in 1948, this has fueled much speculation about the end times, and affected political views regarding the nation of Israel.

So, is Israel referenced in Scripture as a national state, or is Israel a reference to the church? Is the church now the true Israel that the Scriptures speak about? Or is Israel ultimately a reference to the Christ? Have all of God's promises to and about Israel been fulfilled in Christ? Now, again, my purpose in raising these questions tonight is not to try to answer them, but to simply say, "These questions are out there." They relate to our understanding of the return of Christ, because, as we mentioned, Romans 9-11 talks about an ingathering of Israel.

So, what are we to conclude in all of this? Well, for now, I simply want to put three conclusions on the table that we know for sure in Scripture. Number one: We know that as Christians, as followers of Christ, we are heirs of a Jewish promise. Our salvation goes all the way back to God's promise to Abraham in the Old Testament, the father of the Jewish people. Many passages speak to this. Romans 4:16-25:

That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations"—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, "So shall your offspring be." He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why his faith was "counted to him as righteousness." But the words "it was counted to him" were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

Also, Galatians 3:16 says, "Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, 'And to offsprings,' referring to many, but referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' who is Christ." Galatians 3 continues in verses 25-29,

But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

Also, Colossians 2:11-12, "In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead." Again, in Colossians 3:11, Paul

says, "Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all."

Second, we are saved by a Jewish Messiah. He is the true vine, and God's people are the branches who are connect to Christ, the Messiah. John 15:1-11 talks about this. It says,

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full."

And, ultimately, according to 2 Corinthians 1:20-22, "For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory. And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee."

There is no question that we are heirs of a Jewish mission, we are saved by a Jewish Messiah, and third, we are passionate about Jewish mission, just as Paul was passionate about Jewish mission in Romans 9:1-5, which says,

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit—that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.

We long for all peoples, all nations, to come to Christ, which includes a longing for the Jewish people to come to Christ. We long for Jewish men and women to come to know Jesus as the Messiah, and we work toward that end, and as we work toward that end, that disciples are made in all nations.

So, you put all this together, and you realize that the return of Christ, though absolutely and clearly taught in Scripture, is shrouded by questions concerning timing. Have all of these signs been fulfilled? If not, what still remains to be fulfilled before Jesus returns?

Is the second coming one event or two?

That actually leads to another question that is often debated: Is the second coming of Christ one event or two? Now, some of you didn't even know this was a question, and this is just

going to make you more confused! But there are some who believe that the coming of Christ is actually two events.

First, a secret coming for His church before the tribulation. So, this is commonly referred to as the rapture, when Jesus will come a first time, in secret, to rapture His church from the world. This is the view expressed in the popular, bestselling series *Left Behind* as Christians are suddenly taken up from the earth, and as a result, they are spared the experience of the tribulation on the earth. Again, we'll talk more about the tribulation specifically later. But then, those who believe this would say, there will be a second, public coming of Christ with His church after the tribulation. So, Jesus will come back a second time after the tribulation with the church to inaugurate His millennial kingdom. Again, this is something else that we will hit on later.

Could Jesus come back at any moment?

In contrast to this position, however, are those who would say that the return of Christ is one event, a single moment when Jesus returns for His church. So, you've got questions about the timing of Christ's return, the nature of Christ's return, in one event or two, which then leads to the question: Could Jesus come back at any moment? Put all of this together, based on what you believe about what signs have been fulfilled or not been fulfilled and based on what you believe about His coming in one event or two, this will affect whether or not you believe Jesus could literally come back today.

This is where I would say that, even if...so even if you believed that some of these signs that we've talked about, maybe all of these signs that we've talked about, have not yet been fulfilled, you'd at least have to admit that Scripture seems to teach that Jesus could possibly come at any time. Just listen to the language of the New Testament. Philippians 4:4-7, *"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."*

Titus 2:11-14,

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

James 5:7-9,

Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door.

Jude 20-21, *"But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life."*

People say, "Well, the Bible was written two thousand years ago, and Jesus still hasn't returned, so why should we seriously be anticipating His return today?" Well, for a couple of reasons. One, because we're two thousand years closer to His return than they were, and two, because this is the point whenever Scripture talks about the second coming. The Bible addresses this doctrine in such a way that it's supposed to fill our hearts with anticipation of an any-day event to come. I love the way George Ladd, great New Testament theologian, puts this:

The prophets were little interested in chronology, and the future was always viewed as imminent The Old Testament prophets blended the near and the distant perspectives so as to form a single canvas. Biblical prophecy is not primarily three-dimensional but two; it has height and breadth but is little concerned about depth, i.e., the chronology of future events The distant is viewed through the transparency of the immediate. It is true that the early church lived in expectancy of the return of the Lord, and it is the nature of biblical prophecy to make it possible for every generation to live in expectancy of the end.

What We Do Now...

We trust in the authority of Christ.

That leads us right up to what we do now. In light of the clarity about the fact that Christ is coming back, and amidst the confusion about what exactly will happen before He comes back, what do we do now? Well, first, we trust in the authority of Christ. The Word is clear: Jesus is coming back. Matthew 24:29-31, *"Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory."*

So, we know this: The things of this world are passing, but the truth of His Word is permanent. Matthew 24:35 says, *"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."* In other words, we don't know the future, but our sovereign God not only know the future; He holds it in His hands, and He will bring all of His purposes to pass. So, don't build your life on the things of this world that are passing away. Build your life on the truth of God's Word that will never pass away.

We persevere in the power of Christ.

Second, we persevere in the power of Christ. In these primary passages such as Mark 13 and Matthew 24, where Jesus is talking about His return, His point is to encourage His disciples to persevere in their faith. He tells His followers that they will face deception. Matthew 24:4 says, *"And Jesus answered them, 'See that no one leads you astray.'"* It continues a few verses later in Matthew 24:22-25,

"And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short. Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There he is!' do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand."

Similarly, followers of Jesus will face tribulation. Matthew 24:6-8, *"And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are but the beginning of the birth pains."* Jesus is making clear that Christians are not saved from trials. Christians are saved through trials. Jesus is saying, "When it gets harder for you in this world, trust in me."

Followers of Jesus will face temptation. "You will be tempted," Jesus says, "not to trust God. You will be tempted to grow cold in your love for God." Matthew 24:10-13, *"And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved."*

And followers of Jesus will face persecution. Matthew 24:9, *"Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake."* Jesus is telling His disciples that because they bear His name, they will experience suffering. Specifically, because they proclaim His name, they will experience suffering. Persecution inevitably follows kingdom proclamation. This is one of the truths that I hope everyone of us, particularly at an event like this where we are praying for our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world, I hope we realize this truth. Persecution follows kingdom proclamation.

Think about it: If you stay silent about your faith, you will not face resistance in this world. In the same way, if our brothers and sisters in the Middle East stay silent about their faith, say nothing about Christ, then they will not face resistance; they will not be persecuted. When will they be persecuted? They'll be persecuted when they proclaim Christ as the resurrected King and Lord and call people to submit to Him; that's when persecution comes. The more we proclaim Christ in this world, the harder it will be in this world.

Persecution inevitably follows kingdom proclamation, but then, don't miss this: Proclamation inevitably results in kingdom consummation. Right after Matthew 24:9, Jesus says in Matthew 24:14, *"And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."* Regardless of how you define nations and when the end will come, the reality is Jesus is teaching that proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom will result in the consummation of the kingdom. So, let's preach the gospel of the kingdom to the nations, knowing that it may cost us, but knowing, at the same time, that this will eventually usher in the kingdom of Christ!

This is why Jesus in Acts 1, when the disciples were asking Him, "Are you going to consummate the kingdom now that you've risen from the dead?", what does Jesus do? He looks back at them and says, "The time is not for you to know. Here's what you're to do. In the power of the Holy Spirit, go and be my witnesses to the ends of the earth." Oh, mark it down: Our goal is not to answer all these questions about when Christ is coming back; our goal is to give our lives proclaiming the gospel of God in the power of God to the ends of the earth, trusting that He will come back when this commission is complete.

We anticipate the coming of Christ.

So, we trust in the authority of Christ, and we persevere in the power of Christ as we anticipate the coming of Christ. Oh, I think about my precious wife, Heather, who was pregnant this last November, and we were waiting with anticipation on a daily basis for our son to come. I would ask her every day, "Babe, how do you feel?" Every moment I was at the office, I had my phone with me, looking/waiting for her to call. I'd check it periodically to make sure I hadn't missed anything. It affected when I went where, how and where I

traveled, what I did. It's not that I stopped and put all of life on hold, but I lived all of my life with a constant anticipation that each day could be the day and any moment could be the moment. I lived like this because I couldn't wait, and because with each passing day, I knew I was getting closer to seeing this person that I couldn't wait to express love and affection for.

So, think about the coming of Christ like that! May His return be upon your heart, Christian, not in such a way that you stop everything you're doing, but in such a way that it affects everything you're doing. You think about Him, not because you're forced to or because you have to be reminded to think about Him, but because you love Him, and you can't wait to see Him.

We anticipate the coming of Christ, based on Matthew 24:36-42. Listen to this:

"But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left. Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming."

So, we don't know when He's coming, but we're longing for His coming, knowing that His delay will be long. All of these passages imply that there will be waiting involved. His delay will be long; His return will be sudden. He refers to the days of Noah when people were eating and drinking and marrying; everything was normal and usual until, all of the sudden, a flood came and swept them away. That's how it's going to be. People eating lunch, enjoying company, going through their routine, and all of the sudden, to their surprise, Christ will return. Beware of thinking that the day-to-day stuff of your life in this world will last; one day, it's all going to be turned upside down immediately.

Jesus' return will be sudden. On a normal, usual, routine day, Jesus will return as the Judge of your life and this world, and when He returns His judgment will be irreversible. We'll talk about this more in a minute when we talk about the final judgment, but suffice to say at this point: There is absolutely no hint in these passages, and no teaching throughout the Bible, that there will be a second chance for anyone on that day. Our hearts will be exposed. The true nature of our hearts before God will come to light. Nothing will be hidden; everything will be revealed. All the things we like, presume to cover up will be exposed. Things that we, in our pride, didn't even realize were wrong, will be shown wrong.

Which leads to the next reality: Our sentence may be surprising. It goes back to what Jesus said in Matthew 7:21-23, at the conclusion of His most famous sermon:

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'"

Hear this! Many people will be shocked on that day to find that though they thought they were on the narrow road that leads to heaven, they were actually on the broad road that leads to hell. This is one of the most frightening verses in all of Scripture for me as a pastor: To think that there may be many people who think that they are eternally safe when the reality is they do not know Jesus.

And on that day, our lives will stand alone. Two men in the field: One taken, one left. Two women grinding at the mill: One taken, one left. It doesn't matter who you're around on that day, for on that day, homes and neighborhoods and communities and nations will be divided among two groups: Those who truly know Christ and those who do not know Christ, and it doesn't matter what home you're in, who you're married to, what your parents believed, how you grew up, where you spent your life, or where you led your family. On that day, your life will stand alone.

So, feel this in light of the fact that Jesus' delay will be long, His return will be sudden, His judgment will be irreversible, our hearts will be exposed, our sentence may be surprising, and our lives will stand alone. In light of all this, we must be prepared. That's the point of all these passages about the return of Christ. You read especially Matthew 24-25, and the point is to prepare us. Scripture is asking every one of us the question: Are you keeping watch for Christ? Numerous passages talk about Jesus coming like a thief. Matthew 25:42-44 says, *"For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?'"*

First Thessalonians 5:2 says, *"For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night."* 2 Peter 3:10, *"But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed."* Revelation 3:3, *"Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you."* Also, Revelation 16:15, *"Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed!"*

It is kind of an interesting illustration for Jesus, but the point is clear: If you know a thief is coming to your house, you stay awake and you keep watch. Are you keeping watch for our Christ?

Are you faithfully following Christ? Look at the story of the faithful and unfaithful servants in Matthew 24:45-51, and ask the question, "If Jesus came back tonight or tomorrow, will He find you faithful?" The passage says,

"Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. But if that wicked servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed,' and begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know and will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Will you be found walking in obedience or wandering in disobedience? Will you be found loving your neighbor or ignoring your neighbor? Will you be found passionately devoted to your spouse or practically negligent of your spouse? Will you be found hating sin or holding onto sin? Are you faithfully following Christ to the end?

Oh, this is part of the point of the story of the wise and foolish virgins in Matthew 25:1-13 regarding the five foolish women were not prepared to endure to the end. It says,

"Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, 'Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise answered, saying, 'Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.' And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he answered, 'Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.' Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

Jesus makes clear in this story that the kingdom of heaven is not for those who simply respond to an invitation, make a confession, or express some affection. All of these bridesmaids had responded to the wedding invitation. Each of them would have said they were a part of the bridal party, and they all wanted to be a part of the bridegroom's celebration, but they weren't prepared to persevere.

The point is clear: The kingdom of heaven is for those who endure in salvation. Jesus said in Matthew 24, "The one who endures to the end will be saved." Are you faithfully following Christ? Are you serving Christ with what He has given you? That's the next story Jesus tells about servants who worked until the coming of their Master. Matthew 25:14-30 says,

"For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money. Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me five talents; here I have made five talents more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.' And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me two talents; here I have made two talents more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.'

He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering

where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' But his master answered him, 'You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'"

The whole point here is that Jesus is our Master, and we are His stewards. And when He returns, the question this story leave us with is: Will you be commended in your love for Christ, or will you be condemned in your laziness before Christ? D.A. Carson said of this passage: "It is not enough for Jesus' followers to 'hang in there' and wait for the end. They must see themselves [as] servants...who improve what [their Master] entrusts to them. Failure to do so proves they cannot really be valued [as] disciples at all." This is where we realize that belief in the return of Christ does not lead us to sit back in passivity, doing nothing in the world.

That's what the church in Thessalonica was starting to do in the New Testament. People were quitting their jobs because they said, "Jesus is coming back soon. Who needs a job?" And so Paul writes a letter to them and says, "Get a job. Work." Students, don't say, "Well, if Jesus is coming back, I don't need to get an education. What's the point?" That's foolish. Go to school, sharpen your mind knowing that, yes, Jesus could come back tomorrow, but He could also come back thirty years from now, and you want to be found faithful with the mind He's given to you.

Give your life in this world until He comes, serving Him and serving others, which leads to the last question: Are you serving Christians that God has put around you? This is how Jesus closes His teaching on His return, by talking about those who served and loved the poor and imprisoned and outcast brothers and sisters around them. So are you serving Christians that God has put around you...follow this...not because you want to get to heaven.

This is what I love about Matthew 25:31-46. The passage says,

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'"

"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?' Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

The saints who are welcomed into heaven are surprised at what Jesus says. All their acts of service...they're giving away their food and clothes, welcoming strangers, visiting the sick and the imprisoned...they were not doing these things in order to get to heaven; they were shocked to hear that this had anything to do with going to heaven. You serve Christians that God has put around you not because you want to get to heaven, but because Jesus has changed your heart.

Oh, this is huge, particularly for us who live in a land where we have so much, and we are surrounded in this world by brothers and sisters in Christ who are in need. We have brothers and sisters who are starving. So, let's not operate our churches like they don't exist. Let us give extravagantly to them, and in the process, show extravagant love to Him! Let's make sacrifices in our lives and our budgets and our churches of our comforts and our things here. Why? So that our brothers and sisters who are starving can live over there!

This is the fruit of a heart that's been changed by Christ, and it's a fundamental way we prepare for the coming of Christ, by serving Christians that God has put around us, knowing, the whole time, that sacrificial service is not a means of earning salvation. We don't serve other people, specifically our brothers and sisters in Christ, in order to gain brownie points before God so that we can enter heaven. No, sacrificial service is not a means of earning salvation. Instead, sacrificial service is necessary evidence of salvation. A heart that has truly trusted in Christ, and a life that is truly longing for Christ, will be consumed with serving men and women who are in Christ.

In all this, we know that, in the end, when Christ does return, His timing will confound our wisdom. When Christ returns, we will see that the Father's timing makes perfect sense. Second Peter 3:1-10 says,

This is now the second letter that I am writing to you, beloved. In both of them I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles, knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation." For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.

But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.

His timing will confound our wisdom, His church and our lives will accomplish His mission. Oh, let's preach the gospel of the kingdom to all nations. Matthew 24:14, that we read earlier, says, *"And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."* We've talked about this, about exactly what does nations mean here, but I can't improve on George Ladd's words:

"God alone knows the definition of terms [here]. I cannot precisely define who all the nations are, but I do not need to know. I know only one thing: Christ has not yet returned; therefore, the task is not yet done. When it is done, Christ will come. Our responsibility is not to insist on defining the terms; our responsibility is to complete the task. So long as Christ does not return, our work is undone. Let us get busy and complete our mission."

2 Peter 3:11-12 says, *"Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn!"*

Oh God, may it be so, knowing, church, that His timing will confound our wisdom, our lives will accomplish His mission, and His return will exceed our expectations. Do you ever get your hopes up for something, and then when it actually comes, it wasn't all you thought it would be? Not so with the second coming of Christ. This is why the biblical authors cry, "Come! Come, Lord Jesus!" First Corinthians 16:22b says, *"Our Lord, come!"* Revelation 22:20, at the end of the Bible, says, *"He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!"* Charles Wesley pictures it this way:

"Lo! He comes, with clouds descending, once for favored sinners slain;
Thousand thousand saints attending swell the triumph of his train:
Alleluia! Alleluia! God appears on earth to reign.
Ev'ry eye shall now behold him, robed in dreadful majesty;
Those who set at naught and sold him, pierced, and nailed him to the tree,
Deeply wailing, deeply wailing, shall the true Messiah see.
Ev'ry island, sea, and mountain, heav'n and earth, shall flee away;
All who hate him must, confounded, hear the trump proclaim the Day;
Come to judgment! Come to judgment! Come to judgment, come away!
Now redemption, long expected, see in solemn pomp appear!
All his saints, by man rejected, now shall meet him in the air:
Alleluia! Alleluia! See the Day of God appear!
Yea, amen! Let all adore thee, high on thine eternal throne;
Savior, take the pow'r and glory, claim the kingdom for thine own:
O come quickly; O come quickly; alleluia! Come, Lord, come."

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