

THE DOCTRINE OF REVELATION Chapter 17 REVELATION IN GLORY THIS LIFE AND LIFE HEREAFTER

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Transcript

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Chapter 17

REVELATION IN GLORY

THIS LIFE AND LIFE HEREAFTER

We have now arrived at the grand climax of our subject, and well may we beg the Lord to enlarge our hearts that we may take in a soul-rapturing view thereof. Having traced out—most imperfectly—the revelation which God has made of Himself in the created universe, in the moral nature of man, in His shaping of human history, in His incarnate Son, in the sacred Scriptures, and in the saving discovery which He makes of Himself in the souls of His elect at their regeneration and conversion, we shall now endeavour to contemplate something of that manifestation which the Triune God will make in and through Christ unto His saints in Heaven. That experiential knowledge of and communion with God which the believer has here on earth is indeed a real, affectionate and blessed one, so that at times he is lifted out of himself and made to rejoice with joy unspeakable—yet it is but an earnest and a foretaste of what he shall enjoy hereafter! At death he enters into a life which amply compensates for all the trials and tribulations he experiences in this world. Said one who had endured persecution in every form: "For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:18). The profession of the Gospel subjects the believer to peculiar hardships, for it requires him to deny self, take up his cross daily, and serve under the banner of One who is despised and rejected of men generally. To follow the example which Christ has left us involves having fellowship with His sufferings and enduring His reproach, and the more fully we be conformed to His holy image the more shall we be hated, ridiculed and opposed by the world—especially by its graceless professors. In certain periods of history, and in some countries today, particularly fierce and sore persecution was experienced by the saints; but everywhere and in all generations they have found, in different ways and degrees that, all who are determined to live godly in Christ Jesus "shall suffer persecution" (2 Tim. 3:12). Yet that is only one side of the present experience of Christians: they also enjoy a peace which passeth all understanding, and have blessed fellowship with Christ as He walks and talks with them along the way. Moreover, "the hope which

is laid up for them in Heaven," whereof they have heard in the Word of the truth of the Gospel (Col. 1:5), causes them, like Moses of old, to "esteem the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt, for he had respect unto the recompense of the reward" and by faith "endured, as seeing Him who is invisible" (Heb. 11:26, 27). Such is the experience of God's people, and ought to be so increasingly by all of them: looking off from the things seen and temporal unto those which are unseen and eternal. With the eye of faith fixed steadfastly upon the Captain of their salvation, they should run with patience the race set before them. Though a very small part of this world be their portion, they are to "look for a City which hath foundations, whose Maker and Builder is God." Though called upon to suffer temporal losses for Christ's sake, they are to remember that in Heaven, "they have a better and enduring substance." If they be the objects of scorn and infamy, they can rejoice that their names are written in Heaven, and will yet be honored by Christ, not only before the Father and the holy angels, but before an assembled universe He will not be ashamed to call brethren. If their affections be really set upon things above, then having food and raiment they will therewith be content. If they have the assurance they are heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ, it will be a small matter when worms of the earth cast out their names as evil and shun their company. If believing anticipations of the glorious future be theirs, then the joy of the Lord will be their strength. If the would-be disciple of Christ is enjoined to sit down first and count the cost (Luke 14:28), let him also make an inventory of the compensations. How rich those compensations are, how great "the recompense of the reward" is, may be estimated by many considerations: 1. From the contrast presented by our present sufferings. "For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding eternal weight of glory" (2 Cor. 4:17). The sufferings of God's people in this world are, considered in themselves, often very heavy and grievous, and in many cases long protracted. If, therefore, they be "light" when set over against their future bliss, how great that bliss must be! The paucity of human language to express it is seen in the piling up of one term upon another: it is a "weight," it is an "exceeding weight," even a "far more exceeding weight," yea, it is an "eternal weight of glory." 2. From the Divine promises. "Blessed are ye when men shall revile you . . . for great is your reward in Heaven" (Matthew 5:11-12): who can gauge what He terms "great"! "Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (Matthew 13:43). "Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord" (Matthew 25:21). 3. From our relationship to God. The saints are designated His children and heirs, and it is not possible for Almighty God to invest created beings with higher honour than that. This sonship is not that which pertains to them as creatures, and which in a lower sense other creatures share—but rather is it a peculiar privilege and dignity which belongs to them as new creatures in Christ Jesus. As such they are nearer and dearer unto God than the unfallen angels. Therefore the riches of the saints are to be estimated by the riches of God Himself! 4. From the declared purpose of God. "And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenlies in Christ Jesus: that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace, in His kindness toward us through Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:6, 7). If, then, God has designed to make a lavish display of the fullness of His favour unto His people, how surpassingly glorious will such a demonstration of it be! As another has said, "When the Monarch of the universe declares His purpose of showing how much He loves His people, the utmost stretch of imagination will struggle in vain to form even a slight conception of their glory." 5. From the saints being God's inheritance. All creatures are God's property, but the saints are His in a peculiar sense. They are expressly denominated "God's heritage" (1 Pet. 5:3), which imports that all other things compared with them are trifling in His view. On them He sets His heart, loving them with an everlasting love, valuing them above the angels. That affords another standard by which we may measure their future felicity. Well might the Apostle pray that the eyes of our understanding should be enlightened, that we might know, "what is the hope of His calling, and what the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints" (Eph. 1:18). According as God has glory in the

saints, they themselves will be glorious. 6. From the love which Christ bears them. Of that love they have the fullest proof in His infinite condescension to become incarnate for their sakes, in the unparalleled humiliation into which He entered in His producing for them a perfect robe of righteousness, and in His making a full atonement for all their sins. That involved not only a life of poverty and shame, of enduring the contradiction of sinners against Himself, but of suffering the wrath of God in their stead. Such love defies description and is beyond human comprehension. If He so loved us when we were enemies, what will He not bestow on us as His friends and brethren! 7. From the reward God has bestowed upon Christ. This also affords us a criterion by which we may gauge what awaits the saints. The stupendous achievements of Christ have been duly recognized by the Father and richly recompensed. That reward is one which is proportioned to the dignity of His person, one which is answerable to the revenue of honour and praise which His infinitely meritorious work brought to God, and which is commensurate with the unparalleled sufferings He endured and the sacrifice He made. When God gives He does so—as in all His other actions—in accord with whom and what He is. He has highly exalted the Redeemer, and given Him the name which is above every name. In John 17:22 we find the Lord Jesus making mention to the Father of "the glory which Thou hast given Me." Oh, what a transcendent and supernal glory that will be! And that glory He shares with His beloved people: "the glory which Thou gavest Me, I have given them"! That which pertains to the heavenly Bridegroom is also the portion of His Bride. "To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with Me in My throne, even as I also overcame and am set down with My Father in His throne" (Rev. 3:21). The Head and His members form one body, and therefore, "when He who is our life shall appear, then shall we also appear with Him in glory" (Col. 3:4). While the Scriptures make no attempt to gratify a carnal curiosity concerning the nature and occupations of that life into which the regenerate enter when they pass out of this world, yet sufficient is told them to feed hope and gladden their hearts. While it is stated that "eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him" (1 Cor. 2:9), let it not be overlooked that the same passage goes on to say, "But God hath revealed them unto us by His Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea the deep things of God" (v. 10). Yes, He has, to no inconsiderable extent, graciously revealed the same in the Word of Truth, and while we are to beware of lusting to be, "wise above what is written," we should spare no pains to be made wise to what is written. If the unregenerate go to such trouble and expense in manufacturing telescopes and erecting observatories in order to examine the stellar planets, and take such delight in each fresh discovery they make, yet never expect to personally possess those distant stars, how intense should be our interest in those glories of Heaven which will soon be ours forever! Not only has God been pleased to reveal to His people something of the blissful future awaiting them, but even while still, in this vale of tears, He favors them at times with real foretastes of the same. Though at present we are able to form only the most imperfect and indistinct ideas of the saints' felicity in Heaven, nevertheless, in those moments of high elevation of soul, when the believer is abstracted from external things and absorbed with contemplating the perfections of God, he joins heartily with the Psalmist in exclaiming, "Whom have I in Heaven but Thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire besides Thee" (Ps. 73:25). Not only at conversion, when the soul rejoices in the knowledge of sins forgiven and of his being accepted in the Beloved, but afterwards, in seasons of intimate fellowship with the Lord, the conscious motions of sin are suppressed, and he is sensible only of the exercise of holy desires, love and joy. Such an experience is a real "earnest" of that which he will enjoy to a far greater degree when he is delivered from the body of this death (indwelling corruptions) and is "present with the Lord," no longer viewing Him through a mirror, but beholding Him "face to face." It is at the second coming of Christ or at death that the believer in Him enters into the glorified state, and therefore, before examining what Holy Writ has to say upon the latter, we propose to enter into some detail on what it teaches concerning his

dissolution. Since the vast majority of the redeemed enter Heaven through the portals of death—for they have been doing so for almost 6,000 years, and the New Testament seems to intimate there will be very few indeed of them upon earth at the Redeemer's return—it is appropriate that we should do so. Moreover, there is a real need for us to, for in certain quarters scarcely anything has been given out, either orally or in writing, for the instruction and comfort of God's people upon the dying of the saint. Not only does nature shrink from the experience, and unbelief paint it in black, but the Devil is not inactive in seeking to strike terror into their hearts. Not a few have been deprived of the blessed teaching of the Word thereon, because they have been erroneously led to believe that for a Christian to think much about death, or seek to prepare himself for it, is dishonoring to Christ and utterly inconsistent with "looking for that blessed hope" and living in the daily expectation of His glorious appearing. That there is no real inconsistency between the two things is clear from many considerations. Whether the Saviour will return before "the millennium" or not until the close of earth's history—whether His coming be "imminent," or whether certain events must first take place—this is sure—that the Apostle Paul was among the number of those who "waited for God's Son from Heaven" (1 Thess. 1:10). Nevertheless, that did not deter him from communicating a most comforting and assuring description of what takes place at the death of a Christian (2 Cor. 5:1-8). Let us also point out that when exhorting the New Testament saints to run with patience the race which is set before them, the first motive which the Holy Spirit supplies for the same is to remind them that they are "compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses" (Heb. 12: 1)—the reference being to those whose testimony is described in the previous chapter, of whom it is said, "these all died in faith" (Heb. 11:13), and where the triumphant deaths of Isaac, Jacob and Joseph are most blessedly depicted (vv. 20-22). We propose, then, to dwell upon the death of a child of God, the accompaniments or attendants of the same, and the glorious sequel thereto. One of the distinguishing features of the Holy Scriptures and one of the many proofs of their Divine inspiration is their blessed illumination of the grave and the revelation they vouchsafe concerning the hereafter. The light of nature and the best of pagan philosophy could provide no certainty about the next life. The famous Aristotle, when contemplating death, is said to have expressed himself thus: "Anxius vixi, dubius morioa, nesci quo vado," which signifies, "I have lived in anxiety, I am dying in doubtfulness, and know not where I am going." How delightful the contrast of a Christian who can affirm, "having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ, which is far better" (Phil. 1:23). How profoundly thankful should we be unto God for His Holy Word! It not only reveals to us the way of salvation, makes clear the believer's path of duty, but it irradiates the valley of shadows and lifts a comer of the veil, affording to us a view of Immanuel's land. If God's people made a more prayerful and believing study of and meditated upon what the Word teaches about their departure from this world and their Homegoing, death would not only be divested of its terrors, but would be welcomed by them. That there is a radical difference between the death of a believer and of an unbeliever is clear from many passages. "The wicked is driven away in his wickedness, but the righteous hath hope in his death" (Prov. 14:32), upon which Thomas Boston well said: "This text looks like the cloud between the Israelites and the Egyptians: having a dark side towards the latter and a bright side towards the former. It represents death like Pharaoh's jailer, bringing the chief butler and the chief baker out of prison: the one restored to his office, and the other to be led to his execution. It shows the difference between the godly and ungodly in their death: who, as they act a very different part in life, so in death have a very different exit. . . The righteous are not driven away as chaff before the wind, but led away as a bride to the marriage chamber, carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom. The righteous man dies not in a sinful state, but in a holy state. He goes not away in sin, but out of it. In his life he was putting off the old man, changing his prison garments; and now the remaining rags of them are removed, and he is adorned with robes of glory. He has hope in his death: the well-founded expectation of better things than he ever had in this world."

Proverbs 14:32 is but one of many passages in the earlier Scriptures which evince that the Old Testament saints were far from being in the dark regarding death or what lay beyond it. They knew that in God's presence is "fullness of joy, at Thy right hand there are pleasures forevermore" (Ps. 16:11). Said David, "I will behold Thy face in righteousness: I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with Thy likeness" (Ps. 17:15). And again, "Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever" (Ps. 23:6). It is true that life and immortality have been brought more fully to light through the Gospel (2 Tim. 1:10), nevertheless, it is clear that from the dawn of human history, the light of Divine revelation had, for the saints, illuminated the tomb. "Thou shalt guide me with Thy counsel and afterward receive me to glory" (Ps. 73:24), which, as a summary, goes as far as anything taught in the New Testament. "Many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake: some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt" (Dan. 12:2). And therefore, it is said of all those who died in faith that, having seen the promises of God afar off, they "were persuaded of them and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth" (Heb. 11:13). Before proceeding further, let us face the question, Why does a child of God die? Since physical death be one of the consequences of sin, and since the Lord Jesus has paid the whole of its wages, and therefore put it away for His people, why should any of them have to enter the grave? A number of reputable writers whom we have consulted deem that a great and insoluble mystery, while others evade it by saying that such presents no greater problem than sin's remaining in us after regeneration. But neither of those things should present any difficulty: both are designed for God's glory and their good. As Proverbs 14:32 shows, there is a vast difference between the death of the righteous and that of the wicked. Death is not sent to the former as a penal infliction, but comes to him as a friend—to free him from all further sorrow and suffering—to induct the heir of glory into his inheritance. Why should a Christian die? sufficient for the disciple to be as his Master, and "made conformable unto His death." What a fearful hardship had the saints from Pentecost onwards been obliged to remain on earth till the end of time! Surely it is an act of Divine love to remove them from the vale of tears! But could not God have translated them to Heaven without seeing death, like He did Enoch and Elijah? Yes, but they were exceptions; and in such case Christ would not have the glory of raising their bodies from the dust and fashioning them like unto the body of His glory!

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