

Essay #1:
Eagerly Await the Savior as You Prepare for Death

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“But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ,” St. Paul writes to the Philippian congregation (Phil. 3:20). The apostle speaks about our eternal abode. Heaven is the Kingdom of God, and the throne of God is there. A man can go to heaven in two ways. One of these ways is through death.

Death concludes the earthly journey of man. Sooner or later every man must face death. Death awaits everyone, no matter who they are on earth: a president or a king, a shepherd or a fisherman, a scientist or an actor, a man or a woman, an adult or a little child. The whole history of human civilization shows that all people are mortal. Death may be sudden and unexpected, or sometimes it comes as a result of a lingering illness and chronic suffering.

1. How death may be defined

What is to be understood by death?

Medicine attributes death to a malfunction or the termination of the activity of a certain organ of the human body: cerebral stroke, cardiac arrest, kidney failure, cirrhosis of the liver, etc. Philosophers take a general philosophical approach to this question. They call death the state opposite to life. So, in order to know what death is, one needs to know what life is.

Poets give a figurative definition of death. According to them, for example, death is the shore of the sea of vanity. We can mention other definitions of death, but all such definitions, which are given by men, don't provide any clarification and offer no help in facing and preparing for death. All such definitions of death express one thing, its inevitable and mysterious character, which instills fear in man throughout his life and can't bring him any comfort.

Only God in His Scriptures gives us an accurate picture of what death is.

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The first mention of death occurs already in Genesis 2. God warned Adam: “. . . *in the day that you eat from it you will surely die*” (Gen. 2:17 NAU). But when Adam disobeyed God, yielded to the temptation of Satan, and ate the fruit from the tree from which he should not have eaten, then his death, as it is usually understood by people, did not come immediately, as God had warned. Adam lived on, begat sons and daughters, saw many of his descendants, “and all the days that Adam lived on earth were nine hundred and thirty years” (Gen. 5:5).

Did not God’s warning to our first parents come true on that day? Actually Adam’s life changed immediately after the fall in the garden of Eden, when he ate the forbidden fruit, and changed quite drastically. He became a different man. Adam lost the image of God and the likeness of God, which he had had before the fall. Adam lost the intimate relationship he had with God because, as we are told, “*the Lord God banished him from the garden of Eden*” and “*he drove the man out*” (Gen. 3:23,24). Thus Adam was alienated from God through the fall into sin. Alienation, separation is death. The separation of a sinful man from God is spiritual death.

Therefore Adam became a dead man to God. St. Paul calls Gentiles dead in this sense when he addresses them in his epistles: “*As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins . . . God, who is rich in mercy . . . made us alive*” (Eph. 2:1,4,5).

All succeeding generations became spiritually dead because of their sins, for “*through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners*” (Rom. 5:19).

If we go back to the events in the garden of Eden, we will see another result of Adam’s fall. “*By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return*” (Gen. 3:19). The Lord reminds Adam of his creation and announces to him the future consequence of his disobedience. These words of the Lord set limits to man’s life on earth. A man will live until he turns to dust, until he returns to the ground again. This is the death that is ordinarily called “physical,” however, we call it a “temporal” or “corporal” death because man’s body and soul are separated for a certain undetermined period of time.

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Man is a unique creation of the Lord because *“the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being”* (Gen. 2:7). The complex nature of man (body and soul) defines temporal death as separation of the soul from the body. This is clear from the words of God: *“Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee”* (KJV Lk 12:20), i.e., this very night you will die.

When a man dies, his body goes to the grave to turn into dust and wait for the day of the Final Judgment. *“And the dust returns to the ground it came from,”* we read in Ecclesiastes (Eccl. 12:7).

After the fall God told Adam about his death: *“dust you are and to dust you will return”* (Gen. 3:19). And since Adam begat children *“in his own likeness, after his image”* (Gen. 5:3), Adam’s descendants also were mortal. And this means that all men are *“destined to die once”* (Heb. 9:27).

Temporal, or corporal, death is not a complete annihilation of man, as Jehovah’s Witnesses and atheists believe. Temporal death is the deprivation of corporal life through the separation of the soul from the body. In other words, temporal death is not the last act of man’s existence. The Bible clearly states that after temporal death man faces two possibilities: either eternal life or eternal death.

What is eternal death? And when can it come?

Many Bible passages present the idea of eternal death. This will be *“everlasting punishment”* (Mat. 25:46). *“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels’”* (Mat. 25:41). These words present death as God’s eternal punishment. The Lord calls those who deserve such a punishment “cursed” and sends them into the eternal fire, where the devil and his angels will be tormented. The devil, an implacable and bitter enemy of the Lord, the author of our temptations, entices the world and opposes the divine cause. And the Lord sends those who turned away from God to their eternal destruction together with the devil. *“He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with*

everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power” (2 Thes. 1:8,9). This is what St. Paul says about eternal death. One can also note that Scripture relates eternal death to the resurrection of the dead. *“Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt”* (Dan. 12:2). Since eternal death will come with the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will mete out justice in the Last Judgment to sinners who will not have come to the knowledge of God and will not have repented, the apostle John calls it the second death: *“But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death”* (Rev. 21:8).

Thus the Scripture speaks of death on three levels:

- A. ***Spiritual death:*** the separation of the sinner from God. The absence of spiritual life tells about a sinful life and a departure from a godly life. *“They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more”* (Eph. 4:18,19).
- B. ***Temporal death:*** the separation of soul and body. *“When you hide your face, they are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust”* (Ps. 104:29).
- C. ***Eternal death:*** the eternal separation of the sinner (soul and body) from God. Eternal death is the fate of the ungodly. *“But all sinners will be destroyed; the future of the wicked will be cut off”* (Ps. 37:38). Their bodies and souls will suffer eternal torments in the unquenchable fire.

2. The cause and purpose of death

At first sight the causes of death may appear to be natural: illness, accidents, natural disasters (tornados, floods, earthquakes), famine, wars, but Scripture reveals that the real cause of death is something else. God did not create man as a mortal being. Man became mortal because of sin. *“Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and*

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in this way death came to all men, because all sinned" (Rom. 5:12). St. Paul summarizes the cause of man's death in the most concise expression: *"For the wages of sin is death"* (Rom. 6:23). Death came to people as a result of sin: *"in Adam all die"* (1 Cor. 15:22).

In other words death is a response of the Lord to the disobedience of man in the garden of Eden. The Lord punished man with death. Just wrath is heard in the words of the Lord: *"to dust you will return"* (Gen. 3:19). Later, the prophet Ezekiel reminds the people of Israel of this truth: *"The soul who sins is the one who will die. The son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous man will be credited to him, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against him"* (Ezek. 18:20). Luther wrote: *"Death is everlasting punishment by divine wrath, and death can not remove sin because it is cursed itself."* Therefore, for sinners death is retribution, a severe penalty which is imposed by God on a guilty man according to divine justice. *"You will die in your sin"* (Jn. 8:21), the Lord Jesus Christ said to the Jews who rejected him as their Savior during his earthly ministry, when he was fulfilling the will of his Heavenly Father. And man is unable to free himself from death as God's punishment. The will of God determines the length of a man's life. Therefore, when leaving this world, man has to acknowledge to God: *"My times are in your hands"* (Ps. 31:15). Man cannot avoid death; moreover, he cannot even know the day or the hour of his departure.

By subjecting guilty man to death the Lord intended to accomplish several purposes. We have already noted above that one of the purposes of death is to punish man for breaking God's commandment. For a wicked man death is a fulfillment of the horrifying warning: *"Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you"* (Ps. 73:27). But what does death mean for a believer? What does the approaching hour of death portend for a believer?

Death brings a number of blessings for believers:

- A. For the righteous, death can mean an escape from suffering, temptation, fear, terror, harm, and the dangers to which

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man is always exposed in our sinful world. Remember how downcast Job was when misfortune befell him: *“What I feared has come upon me; what I dreaded has happened to me. I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest, but only turmoil”* (Job. 3:25,26). He even cried: *“Why did I not perish at birth, and die as I came from the womb?”* (Job. 3:11).

- B. Death allows the believer to get rid of the sinful flesh and shed the mortal body. *“I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable”* (1 Cor. 15:50).
- C. The death of a righteous man leads to a joyful resurrection. *“Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life—”* (Dan. 12:2). *“Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out— those who have done good will rise to live”* (Jn. 5:28,29). The death and resurrection of the believer testify to the infinite value of the Good News and the grace of God, which was revealed in the coming of the Son of God, Jesus Christ: *“I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full”* (Jn. 10:10). Full life is life in heaven with God. This is eternal life, but it can come only after a believer’s death. This truth is confirmed by the incident with the thief who was crucified on the cross next to the Lord Jesus Christ. In the last minutes before his death the thief repented and confessed before the Lord. And the Lord Jesus Christ immediately answered: *“I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise”* (Lk. 23:43). The thief came to faith, was justified, and entered paradise. But he did not escape death; he had to die before going to paradise.
- D. The Lord Jesus Christ suffered death on the cross. After the resurrection he ascended to heaven and sat down at the right hand of his heavenly Father *“at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty”* (Heb. 8:1). For a believer to suffer death on earth in order to rise again means to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. All believers have to follow the path of Jesus Christ, the path which leads to the Kingdom of everlasting glory and delight in the presence of Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul wrote about heaven: *“I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far”* (Phil. 1:23).

3. What happens to body and soul at death

Since man is a union of two elements: earthly and heavenly (body and soul), death, according to Scripture, manifests itself differently in these two elements.

Both the Old and New Testaments prove most conclusively that the death of a man on earth comes when his soul leaves the man, i.e. abandons his body.

When the only son of the widow of Zarephath became ill and died, the prophet Elijah stretched himself out on the boy and cried to the Lord: *“O Lord my God, I pray thee, let this child’s soul come into him again!”* (KJV 1 Kings 17:21). The prophet clearly speaks about the soul of the boy. And he speaks about it as being absent from the lifeless body and prays for its return. The following words of the Scripture convince us of that completely: *“And the Lord heard the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came into him again, and he revived”* (KJV 1 Kings 17:22).

We see that God does not create a new soul in order to bring the widow’s son back to life, but returns the same one into the lifeless body of the boy.

When the Lord Jesus Christ raised Jairus’ daughter, we read the same words: *“Her spirit returned, and at once she stood up”* (Lk. 8:55).

In the book of Acts we read about an occurrence when at night during Paul’s lengthy talk a young man named Eutychus sank into a deep sleep, fell to the ground from the third story, and *“was picked up dead”* (Acts 20:9). But the apostle Paul restored him to life. *“Paul fell on him and embracing him said, ‘Trouble not yourselves; for his life is in him’”* (KJV Acts 20:10). The apostle asserted with confidence that the soul of Eutychus had returned to his body. At dawn *“the people took the young man home alive and were greatly comforted”* (Acts 20:12). St. Paul testified that when the soul is in the body, a man is alive.

What happens to man’s body and soul after death? As the Lord said, the body turns into dust. *“Dust you are and to dust you will return”* (Gen. 3:19). The body has to return to the ground from which it was created.

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In the ground the body is subject to decay. It decomposes, becomes worm food, and slowly disintegrates. Although a dead body decays in the grave and turns into dust, it is not lost. The Scripture testifies about that: *“I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God”* (Job 19:25,26).

These words tell us about the believer’s lot. Resurrection to glory awaits the believer’s body decaying in the grave. The flesh of a dead man will be restored. The bodies of believers will be raised to God’s glory, while the bodies of the wicked and the lawless will be raised for destruction in hell. *“Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt”* (Dan. 12:2). The prophet Daniel heard the same prophecy about his destiny from the man clothed in linen: *“As for you, go your way till the end. You will rest, and then at the end of the days you will rise to receive your allotted inheritance”* (Dan. 12:13).

Thus, we see that the body does not disappear after death. Nor does the soul of a man, after his death. The soul will continue to exist. But how and where the soul will exist depends on where the soul of a man will be after he leaves this world.

As usual, the Scripture speaks about two possibilities, two destinies, two ways, two places where a man and his soul can go after death.

The believer’s soul will return to God. We can say this on the basis of the words of Ecclesiastes: *“And the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it”* (12:7).

When dying on the cross, the Savior pronounced in a loud voice that he, the Son of God, commended his spirit to his heavenly Father: *“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit”. When he had said this, he breathed his last”* (Lk. 23:46).

The death of the martyr Stephen also testifies that the believer’s soul goes to God. Hateful Jews were stoning him for the Word of God, and Stephen, feeling that death was near, prayed to God: *“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit”* (Acts 7:59). After that he passed away.

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The believer's soul remains with God. *"But God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave: for he shall receive me"* (Ps. 49:15), says the psalmist, i.e., the soul of a righteous man will be with God.

And what does the Bible say about the unbeliever's soul? It suffers a different fate. The soul of a wicked man goes to hell. Here the example of the rich man, who lived in luxury every day and did not share with the poor, is often cited. When he died, the rich man found himself in hell *"where he was in torment"* (Lk. 16:23). *"The soul of the transgressors"* is evil (Prov. 13:2). But the Lord abhors evil. This means that the souls of the lawless will be alienated from God and will burn in the fire of hell.

4. The intermediate state of the soul between death and the Last Day

There must be an intermediate state of the soul between death and the Last Day because this is a time of waiting between the separation of the body and soul and the Judgment Day. This follows from the fact that the Judgment and full retribution will come after the second advent of Jesus Christ.

We already mentioned where souls go after death. According to Scripture there are only two places where the souls of the dead can be. They are either paradise, in heaven, where God dwells, or in hell, in Hades, the abode of the dead. Although the Roman Catholic Church introduces another abode for the souls of the dead, which is placed between hell and paradise and called purgatory, this idea has no scriptural basis. The teaching of purgatory is closely related to the teaching of salvation by works, which disparages and minimizes the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. Therefore the doctrine of purgatory should be rejected as contradicting Holy Scripture and undermining faith in our Savior Jesus Christ.

What does the Scripture say about the state of souls in paradise?

They spend their waiting-time with God. The Scripture assures us that the souls of the godly are in God's hands. This is clear from the words of the Savior spoken in the last minutes of his suffering and addressed to the repentant thief: *"I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise"* (Lk. 23:43). The

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Lord Jesus Christ says very explicitly: *“you will be with me in paradise.”* But to be with God means to be alive because *“he is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive”* (Lk. 20:38). When the Son of God prayed before going to the garden of Gethsemane, he spoke the words which show that the souls of the righteous dwell in paradise with Christ: *“Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am”* (Jn. 17:24). Being with Christ makes the heavenly life of the souls of believers unspeakably happy for they are with God in the state of complete bliss and continuous delight. The apostle John testifies in the book of Revelation: *“Then I heard a voice from heaven say, ‘Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on’”* (14:13). St. Paul maintains the same truth when he says: *“I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far”* (Phil. 1:23). According to Paul it is better to be with Christ than to be in the flesh in the sinful world. *“Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling”* (2 Cor. 5:1,2).

Enjoying blissful peace in the presence of Jesus Christ, the souls of believers wait for the just judgment. *“I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, ‘How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?’”* (Rev. 6:9,10).

From what was said above about the souls dwelling in Paradise one can conclude that any teaching of a sleep of the soul that rules out the active enjoyment of fellowship with God should be classified with the teachings that don't reflect biblical truths.

The Scripture describes the state of the souls of unbelievers in a completely different way. We read that the souls of the wicked are *“the spirits in prison”* (1 Pet. 3:19), which are suffering agony and endless torment. The rich man, who had lived his life in luxury, found himself in hell. Being in torment, he saw Abraham far away and began to pray for mercy. *“So he called to him, Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire”* (Lk. 16:24).

The agony of the rich man in hell will be eternal because God revealed to us that between hell and Abraham's side such "*a great chasm has been fixed*" that nobody can cross it (Lk. 16:26).

5. The Christian's attitude in facing and preparing for death

Thus, death came into the world through man's fault and became inevitable. The lives of all people have one and the same end, death. The psalm of the sons of Korah speaks about the inevitability of death on earth: "*No payment is ever enough that he should live on forever and not see decay*" (Ps. 49:8,9). Death touches all.

God is the source of life, and he did not create man to die. Man was created for life with God; therefore death is repulsive and horrible to him. Usually, people don't want to remember death, refuse to speak about it, and try to avoid thinking about it. But this changes nothing at all in the earthly life of a man and only shows how great is man's fear in the face of his approaching death.

A man feels fear in the face of death because he feels the wrath of God in his conscience: "*The Lord takes vengeance and is filled with wrath. The Lord takes vengeance on his foes and maintains his wrath against his enemies*" (Nah. 1:2). The hour will come when man will have to give an account before the Most High, and man knows that he will not be able to stand before God: "*You alone are to be feared. Who can stand before you when you are angry?*" (Ps. 76:7). "*Who can withstand his indignation? Who can endure his fierce anger?*" (Nah. 1:6). Man feels his absolute helplessness and inability to justify himself before God. The sinner has to acknowledge in despair: "*If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?*" (Ps. 130:3).

All people, including Christians, feel uneasiness and fear before the divine judgment and eternal death. St. Paul explains why Christians experience this fear before the coming death. "*But I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin*" (Rom. 7:23,25). The apostle says that the Old

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Adam is still living in a believer. Therefore the fear of death is still present in the heart of a Christian: *“What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”* (Rom. 7:24).

Although Christians, like all people, worry and shudder at death, they have the hope and confidence to be calm and to face death without fear. Christians have what the wicked and lawless are deprived of. Christians have Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who is their Savior, Mediator, and Intercessor before their Heavenly Father. Christians have faith in Jesus Christ, the(ir) Lord and Savior, which makes their expectation of death entirely different from that of the wicked.

1. As he prepares for death, the Christian knows that Jesus has removed the “sting of death,” sin, by his obedient life and his atoning death. Man cannot get rid of sin, the cause of death, by himself. Nor can he do it with the help of others. No man can help him with this. *“No man can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for him—the ransom for a life is costly, no payment is ever enough”* (Ps. 49:7,8).

Only the Lord, moved by his grace, could redeem the world by sacrificing his only begotten Son Jesus Christ for the sins of the whole world. *“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”* (2 Cor. 5:21). Christians *“know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that they were redeemed from the empty way of life—but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect”* (1 Pet. 1:18,19). By his sacrifice the Son of God fulfilled the will of his Heavenly Father and conquered death for all men by freeing them from sin.

2. As he prepares for death, the Christian knows that since he was saved from sin and became innocent before God, he is exempt from the Final Judgment. *“Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me—will not be condemned,” said Jesus Christ* (Jn. 5:24). While the wicked can’t avoid the righteous judgment of God, the redeemed children of God don’t face the prospect of the Judgment. By his suffering and death the Son of God freed them from their guilt and removed their transgressions forever. *“Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”* (Rom. 8:1).

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3. As he prepares for death, the Christian knows that *“he has already passed from death to life”* (1 Jn. 5:24). John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Lord, preached: *“Whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him”* (Jn. 3:36b). The fate of the believer is entirely different: *“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life”* (Jn. 3:36a). A little later the disciples of Jesus Christ heard this Gospel message: *“I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life”* (Jn. 5:24). Jesus does not say that the believer will pass from death to life soon or some time after death, but that he has already *“crossed over from death to life.”* He has passed from darkness to light, from lie to truth, from unbelief to faith, from a sinful, ungodly, meaningless life to a holy, blessed, eternal life with God.

4. As he prepares for death, the Christian knows that his approaching death is but a sleep from which the Lord Jesus himself will awaken him. We know that from the story that took place in the village of Bethany, where Lazarus lived and died. When the Lord Jesus learned about his death, he said: *“Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up”* (Jn. 11:11). Jesus Christ could only call a believer *“our friend.”* *“Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. So then he told them plainly, Lazarus is dead”* (Jn. 11:13,14). Lazarus was in the grave four days, but the omnipotent Lord Jesus raised him by His power. Lazarus came back to life as if he woke from a sleep. And this will be the case with every believer because the Lord assures us that it is true: *“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die”* (Jn. 11:25,26).

5. As he prepares for death, the Christian knows that death has been completely vanquished. What happened on Golgotha, when Jesus Christ was crucified and, after that, when Jesus Christ appeared alive before many, convinces us that he overcame death and conquered it forever. On Good Friday Jerusalem witnessed the painful and disgraceful death of Jesus Christ. But two days later, on the third day, the Son of God rose from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is a clear and

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obvious proof of his victory over death. *“God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him”* (Acts 2:24). What was fulfilled on Golgotha had been predicted hundreds of years before it happened. Isaiah had prophesied: *“On this mountain the Lord Almighty will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever”* (Is. 25:5,7,8).

The resurrection of Jesus Christ and his life after death testify that death is vanquished. St. Paul had every reason to say: *“Since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him”* (Rom. 6:9). Christ lives and *“cannot die again.”* Therefore he who lives in Christ Jesus does not die, but lives with him.

6. As he prepares for death, the Christian knows that Christ will raise him from death to eternal life. The Lord Jesus spoke about the resurrection of believers very explicitly. He gives glorious promises to the believers, who were given to the Son by the Father. *“And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day”* (Jn. 6:39,40). St. Paul repeats the same promises to the Corinthians: *“In Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him”* (1 Cor. 15:22,23). And other Bible passages also tell us that resurrection awaits believers after death: *“the dead will be raised imperishable”* (1 Cor. 15:52); *“and the dead in Christ will rise first”* (1 Thes. 4:16). As we see, in the face of death, Christians have every reason to trust in the promises of our Lord Jesus, which bring the joy and comfort of the future life.

To summarize the above-said:

Although Christians are restored to a new, holy life, the Old Adam is still living and acting in them. He brings uneasiness and the fear of death into the life of believers. We are afraid of losing our loved ones and intimate friends. We fear the pain and misery that we have to suffer when death comes. But this

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fear is overcome by faith in the saving love of God, which is described in very simple words: “*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life*” (Jn. 3:16). The love of God saves from destruction.

When the Christian begins to feel the fear of death, he can remove it because he always has true and reliable protection. He has the Savior Jesus Christ. When death begins to frighten and terrify him, the Christian knows to whom he can turn and in whom he can put his hope. He can confidently rely on his Savior who has conquered death for him. The Son of God told his disciples: “*In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world*” (Jn. 16:33). His victory over death is our victory. Therefore the Christian calmly prepares to face the hour of his death by looking to Jesus and contemplating his work of redemption, which is fully completed, and by trusting in his promises.

Let death terrify the wicked and the lawless who rejected the Son of God; we Christians should not be afraid of death and depressed by it because we are the redeemed children of God. We are redeemed to God by the righteous blood of Jesus Christ. The price of our redemption is high. Jesus Christ saved us from sin, defeated death, and gave us eternal life. “*I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand*” (Jn. 10:28,29). We know that we are in safe hands, the hands of God. We have nothing to fear. Whatever fear and terror we have to feel before death, all the earthly sufferings of Christians “*are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed to us in heaven*” (Rom. 8:18). Let not death frighten and terrify us; we have the Good news. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came into the world to suffer and die “*so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death*” (Heb. 2:14,15). The Son of God has fulfilled the will of his Father, “*has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel*” (1 Tim. 1:10).

Listening to the Good News and trusting in it, we can boldly and confidently say together with St. Paul: “*But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus*”

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Christ" (Phil. 3:20). We can say that. And we do say that because death no longer terrifies us: we are saved and we are the children of God. And we eagerly await the coming of Jesus Christ, for he is our Savior and he will deliver us from death completely.



Andrey Kozionov of Russia

Essay #2:
**Eagerly Await the Savior
as You Anticipate Resurrection and Glorification**

Pastor Frackson Chinyama
Lutheran Church of Central Africa—Malawi

In the book of 1 Thessalonians 1:10 God says “AND TO AWAIT FOR HIS SON FROM HEAVEN, WHOM HE RAISED FROM THE DEAD—JESUS CHRIST WHO RESCUES US FROM THE COMING WRATH.” The people of the city of Thessalonica, especially those who heard and believed the gospel of Jesus Christ that the Apostle Paul preached, were living as different people. The gospel had changed their way of living. The gospel motivated them to forsake the unchristian way of life. They were living as people who were waiting for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. The same gospel that Paul proclaimed is now proclaimed to many countries in the world. The same power that changed the Thessalonians is also working through the word and sacraments that we proclaim. The believers of Thessalonica had one hope in their life. They were waiting for the coming of their Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ. They were waiting for the resurrection that Jesus Christ will bring to all the dead on the last day. They were waiting for the glorification that Jesus brings on the last day.

The people of Thessalonica give a good example for all believers to follow. The theme of our Convention this year encourages each and every believer to have the same kind of hope. Maybe one of the questions we can receive from both unbelievers and those who believe differently is:

1. Will There Be a Resurrection of the Dead?

I think you have met people with the question “Will the body that has been turned to dust, or that has been eaten by a wild animal, turn to life again?”

The same doubts we hear from many and the same ridicule we face nowadays when we speak about resurrection was there at the time of Paul. “BUT IF IT IS PREACHED THAT CHRIST HAS BEEN RAISED FROM THE DEAD, HOW CAN SOME OF YOU

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SAY THAT THERE IS NO RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD? BUT SOMEONE MAY ASK, 'HOW ARE THE DEAD RAISED? WITH WHAT KIND OF BODY WILL THEY COME?'" (1 COR 15:12,35) "WHEN THEY HEARD ABOUT THE RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD, SOME OF THEM SNEERED" (Acts 17:32).

All these doubts and objections as to the possibilities of the resurrection must be forwarded and answered by our mighty God. Let us hear what He says: "Jesus replied, 'You are in error because you do not know the scriptures or the power of God (Mt 22:29).'"

Everyone who believes that there is an omnipotent God will also believe that He is able to do this. He created us through His power and wisdom. He will also raise us through his power and wisdom.

"For if the dead are not raised then Christ has not been raised either" (1 Cor. 15:16). Christ's resurrection was not hidden. He appeared to many. It is a fact. He will also raise people. Hear what God says in the same chapter but verse 20. "But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." There is no room for any doubt concerning resurrection. His resurrection is a sure evidence that we will rise after death.

"But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead how can some of you say that there is no resurrection?" (1 Cor. 15:12). All who preach/say that there is no resurrection show that they are not following the true message that is preached by believers.

Christ himself proved from the Old Testament that there is resurrection. He did so in Matthew 22:31-32 when He says, "But about the resurrection of the dead—have you not read what God said to you, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.'" He is not the God of the dead but of the living. We do have also a person in the Old Testament who confessed his faith in the resurrection of the dead. His name is Job. "I know that my redeemer lives and in the end he will stand upon the earth, and after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see Him with my own eyes—I and not another. How my heart yearns within me." (Job 19:25)

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The Book of Daniel also speaks of resurrection. “Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life and others to shame and everlasting contempt.” (Dan.12:2)

John says in his Book, “Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done good will rise to live and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.” (John 5:28-29)

Therefore on the basis of Scripture every believer confesses, “I believe in the resurrection of the dead.”

The next question we may ask ourselves is:

2. Who Will Be Raised Bodily from the Dead?

First of all I would like to share with you about false ideas about death in my country. These are beliefs that were established before Christianity and are one of the barriers that Christianity faces. There is a belief that the spirits/souls of those who have died go out of their bodies the moment a person dies. These spirits continue to roam around within the boundaries of the relatives (boundaries mean any place where a relative lives). These spirits become mediators between the living and the god of ancestors. They communicate through night dreams. The spirits see to it that the living are showing love to them (spirits) by giving them food at special times and also by living a good life. Whenever people break these laws, they are given special punishment like leprosy, shortage of rain, and others.

Those who follow the laws are blessed in different ways like becoming rich, having a good job. There are special places where people believe that these spirits stay. They stay in places like big trees, rivers, and mountains. The spirits also communicate through causing one of the relatives to collapse from time to time and speaking the message to people. When this happens, people must respond as quickly as possible. This is what they believe is life after death.

It is true that the soul goes out of the body at the time of death. But it goes either to hell or to paradise/heaven. The resurrection is the rejoining of that soul with its body on the last day when

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the Lord comes again. Not only those who believed in Christ and looked forward to their resurrection will rise but also those who did not believe and were not looking forward to it. It will be Christ's call to rise. Unlike the call to repent and believe that can be rejected, this call will be for all that died and no one will reject. Luke says in his book: ". . . that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked" (Acts 24:15).

Surely it will be a wonderful day. Every soul will go to its original body. Even the soul of those bodies that were burned to ashes or those whose bodies are missing in the Asian tsunami will find them and rejoin them. The Lord Almighty will do it.

I had a relative who died while as a member of a church we call Ethiopian church. A bishop of that church preached at the funeral. From the beginning to the end of his sermon, his message was about the difficulties that our remaining family will face because of the death of that person. He said "kwatha." He is finished. He is no more. He will not come back. He will not show all the good things he was doing to you. We will never meet anymore. The good man is gone. Amen!

When the burial was done, one of the relatives spoke to me and said, "It would be good if we had no service at all. The man did not bring to us any hope of resurrection. The more he preached louder, the more tears came from our eyes."

This relative reminded me about what one of the pastors told me when we were together at a funeral at my congregation. It was when I was an evangelist. He told me: "The heart of a funeral sermon is the message of resurrection". Therefore, we conclude that all people who will be dead by the time Jesus comes again will rise. This brings us to another question:

3. Who Will Be Bodily Glorified?

We answer: Only those who at their time of death had died in faith in their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and those who at the time of Christ's coming would be found believing in their Savior Jesus. Or we can just say "all who will be found in God's kingdom". Who are these? They are those bodies who have rejoined their souls that were with the Lord in heaven since the time they died. They are the people who had Christ's rule in their

hearts until their time of death. The other group that will be glorified is the one that will be living but has Christ's rule in their hearts until the moment Christ comes. The two groups above will be in one group. They are the ones that Jesus calls "sheep". They will be separated from unbelievers. Apostle Paul speaks about this when he says, "Listen I tell you a mystery, we will all be changed—in a flash, in a twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable and (we) will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory'". (1 Cor 15:51-54)

The verse I have just quoted above has reminded me about the message that one of the evangelists in my home village always preaches. In every sermon he begins like this: "The perishable will be clothed with the imperishable". The evangelist is looking forward to the day when all the believers will be glorified. Therefore only believers will be glorified.

That brings us another question:

4. What Will Be Involved in the Glorification of Our Bodies?

We shall be the same people as we are now. You remember how the poor Lazarus recognized Abraham in God's bosom. You may also remember how Peter on the day of transfiguration of our Lord recognized Elijah and Moses speaking with the Lord. We will be the same people but we will be changed. (1 Cor.15:52)

Our bodies will be spiritual. They will be changed bodies that will not be subject to the needs of this life nor to the laws which now govern us. We shall have incorruptible bodies that will be free from traces and consequences of sin.

Each one of us here knows how sometimes we struggle with certain sins in our life. With our glorified bodies that will not happen. We shall have strong bodies that will be free from all frailties, weakness, defects and deformities. Our bodies will never die. We shall have glorious bodies clothed with beauty, perfection, honor, and glory. "Who by the power that enables

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him to bring everything under his control will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.” (Phil. 3:21)

“So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.” (1 Cor. 15:42-44)

With our glorified bodies we shall fully know God. We shall know his will and his ways. We shall understand those things that are now still dark to us. All our questions both with respect to certain mysteries of doctrine and to happenings in our personal lives will be fully answered.

“For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror, then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part, then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.” (1 Cor 13:9-13)

There will no old Adam, no temptation to contend with, no sorrow, no grief, but always in peace. “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain.” (Rev 21:4)

There will be a wonderful life in heaven. There will be perfect righteousness and holiness. There will be no differences among the saints but the thoughts, desires, and actions of all of them will be in complete harmony with the will of God. There will be full satisfaction, perfect contentment. “And I in righteousness I will see your face. When I awake, I will be satisfied with seeing your likeness.” (Psalms 17:15)

Here in this life each and every country cries for security. The more money they spend to secure their lives, the more we hear of destructions involving the same areas. Our glorious bodies will not meet such things at all. “My father who has given them to me is greater than all, no one can snatch them out of my father’s hand.” (John 10:29)

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Here in this life we may have joy and pleasure but some conditions may come suddenly and take them away from us. Our glorified bodies will have unspeakable joy and God pleasing pleasure that no one, no condition or circumstance will end it. “Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice and no one will take away your joy” (John 16:22).

Our joy will reach its climax when we shall see God as He is. “Dear friends, now we are children of God and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when He appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is” (1 John 3:2). Already I can guess what your next question is.

5. How Much Glory Will This Be?

Paul in his second letter to Corinth admits that the joys and pleasure of heaven are so great that it is not possible to adequately describe them in human tongue (2 Cor 12:2-14). We will know about it completely when we are up there. However, there will be degrees of glory. As there are degrees of punishment for the lost in hell, and as there are degrees and ranks among the good angels in heaven, so there will be degrees of glory for the saints in heaven. Greater glory is given as reward and not of merits. I think you know the parable of the ten minas. “The first one came and said, ‘Sir your mina has earned ten more.’ ‘Well done my good servant!’ his master replied. ‘Because you have been trustworthy in a very small matter, take charge of ten cities’” (Luke 19:16-17). Here the master clearly told the man that what he has done is a small thing and yet we see the master putting him in charge of big things. It is because of the love the master had.

When I started writing this paper, I could see as if something like a video moving in my mind. I believe the same thing happened to us all when I started reading this paper. It tells us about people coming to life again. It tells us about people (believers) having everlasting joy.

But some people spend time saying that only a few will enjoy that peace. We believers have God’s Word that assures us of the fact all believers will enjoy this glory. “After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before

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the throne and in front of the lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in the their hands.” (Rev. 7:9)

As in my country, many people worry about the name of the church. There are several well-known churches that have been there for a long time. It has become like the custom of many people to influence their children and those who want to marry them to force them to join those churches. The bad thing is that they don't care about what that church teaches.

John in his book does not mention the name of the church of the great multitude he saw standing before the throne of God. The people who were glorified were “they who have come out of great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” (Rev 7:14)

The Lord will gather his believers from all those places, groups that taught the gospel of Jesus Christ. He will gather all those who have trusted His son Jesus as their only Savior from sin. What an encouragement for all of us! The Lord has continued to bless our church by allowing us having only those pastors who cling to the truth. No doubt the Lord will also gather many from our church. He will do so not because of the name Lutheran, but because the gospel is proclaimed in our church.

At this point let us rebuke those who teach falsely concerning “who will be glorified”. There are those who teach that at the time of His coming, He will give a second chance to those unsaved. They even go further by saying that unlike this time when it is possible to deny the call from the Lord to repent, that second chance will be compulsory. When we say the people will be many, this is in no way supporting the teaching that says “all”. However, when “all” means all believers in Christ then that is the truth. “All” believers will be glorified. All Lutheran believers, all believers from other churches too will be glorified.

There will be a wonderful glory. We will have a new heaven and a new earth. The old earth that was occupied by people who lived in constant struggle against three enemies namely: sin, power of the Devil, and death will be no more. There will be new things. The point of a new heaven and new earth brings longer debate. Our advice is always to remember that we

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will know fully when we are up there. At this point I would like to ask you to practice Greek with me to try to know what will happen to the earth.

2 Peter 3:10, “The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.”

παρελεύονται	(fut. ind. παρέρχομαι) pass by, pass away
στοιχεῖα	(στοιχείον) things arranged in a row; alphabet; building blocks; the elements from which all things have come, the material causes of the universe
καυσούμενα	(pres. pass. part. καυσώω) set on fire, burn up
λυθήσεται	(fut. pass. ind. λύω) loose the bonds, untie; dissolve, melt

Literal Translation: “The noisy skies will pass away, and the burning elements will dissolve, and the earth and every work in it will be discovered” (variant: “consumed by fire”).

Some theologians suggest that the Lord will use the melted materials to create the new ones. I don't know what the Lord will do to make the new heavens and new earth. One thing I know is that He is almighty. He knows what He will do. He can just say the word and what He wants can happen. He can also use the melted materials.

After being encouraged about the life we will enjoy, one cannot stop there. What should be the Christian's attitude and comfort in anticipating resurrection and glorification? While the message of resurrection pertains to the future, it has an important and practical bearing on our personal life.

- When Christians learn that it is only through faith they may attain to their glorious inheritance, they are moved to repent their sins and believe in their Savior Jesus Christ. “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.” (Acts 16:31)

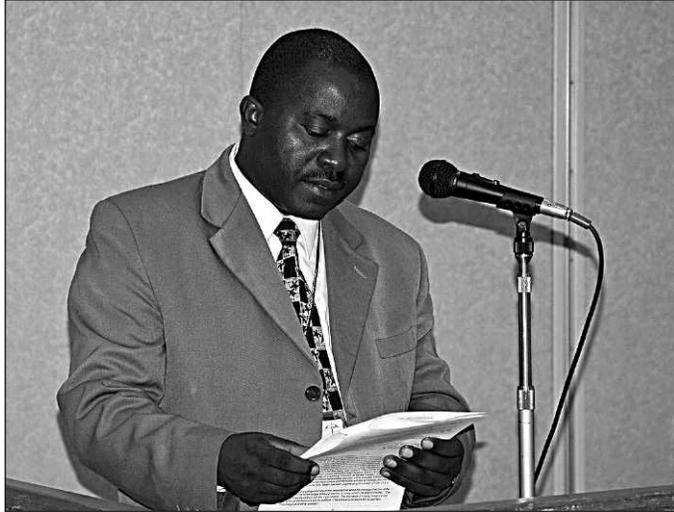
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- Christians are motivated to examine themselves in order to remain faithful to their Lord until he comes again. “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith.” (1 Cor 13:5)

Surely this is the time when each and every Christian should not be just idle. It’s our time to read the Bible and continue to go through the lessons we learned when we were baptized, confirmed, or even going through the books and lessons we learned at the seminary. I do remember the three questions that our evangelist was saying to us when he was teaching us how to prepare ourselves when preparing for Holy Communion. I do think that those questions are good not for only Holy Communion but also at all times as we are waiting for the coming of the Lord.

- As Christians we know that we don’t have a continuing city/place but are looking forward to that holy city where only saints will enter.
- They live as not of this world “I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world even as I am not of it.” (John 17:14-16)
- They avoid worldliness.
- They are to be transformed by the renewing of their mind. “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” (Romans 12:2)
- They do not set their affection on the things of this earth but on the things above. “Set your minds on things above not on earthly things.” (Colossians 3:2)
- As joy fills the heart of every believer, he goes out to share the message with others.
- The message of glorification comforts the believer so much that he is patient in all the temptations, troubles/difficulties that he goes through in this life.
- May the Lord continue to keep us in faith as we await for that great day of our Lord when we will be glorified. May He make us faithful witnesses of this truth to other people.

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Frackson Chinyama of Malawi

Questions

1. Is there any cultural belief in your country concerning life after death?

2. Write any false teaching about death of any church you know.

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3. What encouragement do the people who live unrepentant life get from the false teaching of a “second chance of repentance” when Christ comes again?

4. True or false? The teaching that we will be glorified by faith alone is a weak teaching. It encourages sinful living in this life.
5. True or false? Since we can pray for those who do not believe in Christ so that they can accept God’s word, we can also do the same with the souls that are in hell so that they can receive God’s mercy.

Essay #3:
**Eagerly Await the Savior
as You Look Forward to Christ's Return**

Pastor Gundars Bakulis
Confessional Lutheran Church, Latvia

Part I. The Two Eons.

The purpose of my essay is to ponder the approaching of the new eon of justice, holiness, and immortality. The signs and the very Advent of Christ itself falls under the wider biblical and theological category called the Last Things, or Eschatology. My theme as stated in the title deals with the signs of the approaching new eon of Christ, and the Christ's Second Advent in glory and power which is an essential basis for all Christian hope.

Quite often when speaking of the Second Advent of Christ, our reason ascribes these events only to a certain time in the future. Dr. Hermann Sasse writes in his *We Confess*, "*At the beginning of this century a complacent church regarded the Last Things as an element of the first Christian proclamation which more or less belonged to that first period, a form of the Gospel which was for us of only historical interest. Or, alternatively, it was thought of as something that might be of significance for the future, at the end of our lives, or at the end of the world, something we needed to study only in preparation for such an end. That there is for the church no more vitally relevant doctrine than that of the Last Things was brought home to Christians of Europe by all they were called to endure.*"¹

It is not merely by chance that Christ Himself, when speaking of His second coming, positions and weaves together certain events and signs which are to happen at very different times in history. Illustrative of this are Christ's prophecies of the things to come, first, upon Jerusalem, secondly, universally upon the church in all ages and, thirdly, upon those living on the earth at the time of His Second Advent in Mt 24, Lk 21 and Mk 14. Sometimes it is hard to determine exactly how to interpret

¹Sase, Hermann, *We Confess*, Vol. II; p. 108

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Christ's words timewise concerning certain future events: in a near (closer to Apostle's times) or a far-removed perspective (a time close to the Judgment Day).

John R. Stephenson in the *Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics*, Vol XIII, *Eschatology* treats these terms as the old eon and the new eon. An eon is a Greek term for a very long time period, an age or eternity (also of the world as a spatial concept). The distinction and the relation between the old and the new eon is crucial when interpreting particular words of the Bible concerning the Last Things.

According to Stephenson when speaking of the relation between the eternal and holy eon of Christ and the present limited eon of imperfection, sin and death, one must understand that the new eon (eternal world) has already entered the present mortal world.

Therefore, when thinking of the eschatological signs and of the end times in which the Christians have been living now for almost two thousand years, we must take into account the relation of the two eons in the light of the words of II Peter 3:8, *"But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but in forbearing toward you, not wishing that any would perish, but that all should reach repentance."*

The transcendent (unlimited) timeless world exists side by side with the immanent (limited) and mortal time. So, the signs of the coming of the transcendent world exist within the world of sin and limited time, in a likewise manner as the signs of the existence of a new and holy Adam within a Christian are being manifested by the mortal sinful flesh.

"The perishing old eon has been invaded by an eon suffused with the boundless life of God, an eon which will endure, according to the doxology, 'unto ages of ages'—a phrase rendered by the familiar 'world without end' and the more recent 'now and forever'. The two eons are no longer separated by a clear chronological break one from the other; the future has made a proleptic appearance in the present, so that both eons occupy at once the same time and space. Brought down to the

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*level of the individual member of the mystical body, the struggle between the two antithetical eons may be expressed through the well-known formula: simul iustus et peccator.*⁷²

Part II. Concerning the Time and the Character of the Second Coming of Christ

One thing is clear from Scriptures: no one can determine the exact time of Christ's *parousia*. In the history of the Christian church there has been an abundant number of attempts to predict an exact date for the Judgment Day. Mostly these speculations were derived from different interpretations of the Revelation of Apostle John.

The beast of the Book of Revelation chapter 13, waging war against the saints at times had been seen as Napoleon, Peter the Great, Marx, Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, also as the whole Soviet empire. In accordance with these interpretations there also had been multiple attempts to determine, if not an exact date, then, more or less emphatically, at least a proximity of the coming of Christ.

A most recent and most amazing example is the exegesis of chapter 13 of the Book of Revelation done by the famous Finnish Lutheran theologian Dr. Uuras Saarnivara. He saw the three sixes, the number of the Antichrist, as the three letters from the Greek alphabet representing the numbers, six hundred, sixty and six. ξ, χ. φ³ He positioned these letters in a special way, so that they formed a figure resembling a sickle, a hammer, and a snake in the middle. Those who followed his thought pattern were expecting the final stage of the world events right after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Yet, the Bible and Christ Himself state emphatically that no one, not even the Son of God according to his state of humiliation, can determine when the present world would come to an end and when the Son of God would appear again in glory and

⁷²John R. Stephenson, *Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics*, Vol. XIII, *Eschatology*, pp.27, 28

³Uuras Saarnivara, *Can the Bible be Trusted*; pp. 758–762. U. Saarnivara is mostly known among Lutherans because of his scholarly work standing for the inerrancy of the Bible. His most important work, perhaps, is above quoted *Can the Bible be Trusted*. Dr. Saarnivara was connected with the Finnish pietist movement in Finland and the U.S.

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power. This is solely the knowledge of God the Father and is hidden from the world. “*But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son but the Father only.*” (Mt 24:36)

Acts records Christ’s conversation with the disciples just before the Ascension with regard to the promise to send the Holy Spirit soon. The disciples inquired of Christ about the future kingdom of Israel in connection with this promise. “*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 which the Father has fixed by his own authority.’*” (Acts 1:6,7)

According to the book of Acts these were Jesus’ last words to his disciples. In his answer he implies the reason for existence of this passing eon, namely the last days. And this eon still continues in order that the witness of Christ’s Gospel is brought to the far and distant ends of this earth and to all people whom God has elected to be saved.

It sounds like this question of the disciples implies an earthly reign of Christ. There was, of course, no millennial thought present there since the controversial Revelation 20:4 had not been written yet. Rather, the disciples were anxious to see Christ as the king of Israel soon. Actually, according to Dr. Raymond F. Surburg, the Jewish background thought of that time was rather positively prepared for the concept of the Judgment Day when the dead would rise and the faithful children of Israel would be rewarded and live forever.⁴

Scripture also teaches that the Second Advent of Christ will happen in majesty, that it will be sudden and unexpected for all men living at that time, both believers and non-believers. As the First Advent of Christ was in the state of humiliation of God-Man, so the second advent will be in the state of His exaltation.

Christ will come in power and glory as the King of the heavenly kingdom. At the time of His second coming will happen the

⁴Surburg, F; Raymond; *Introduction to the Intertestamental Period*; p. 67. He suggests that the apocryphal literature of the intertestamental period is a proof to that, for example, the book of Jesus Ben Sirach, or else called Ecclesiasticus.

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resurrection of the dead, both the believers and unbelievers. He will be accompanied by the holy angels who will help Him to bring all the people together before the Judgment throne.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:16 Apostle Paul writes, "*For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the Archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.*" Scripture is clear as to the fact that no one living on the earth at that time will miss Christ's coming.

As it will be the arrival of Christ with the heavenly host it will be like no other arrival of any king or power at all times. Just a few weeks ago President George Bush landed in the Riga airport in his Air Force Number One plane. It was quite a spectacular event and millions of people watched it on TV.

Yet, those who were at that time busy with their work, other thoughts or problems or simply were not interested in watching the news releases could miss the visit of the President of the United States to Latvia. But Christ's arrival will be a supernatural event and will be introduced by supernatural signals.

First will be *the cry of command, the Archangel's call, and the trumpet of God*. Those signals will be not a human means of calling to attention but supernatural signals that will be heard at the moment by everyone living on earth and even by the dead. The present eon will end and the eon of immortality and of timeless joyful life will set in.

Rev 14:14 pictures Christ's coming seated on a cloud with a sharp sickle in His hand. The sickle is not to be taken too literally since it is understood as a picture of Christ coming to gather the harvest of his people for the kingdom of heaven. Also Rev 19:11,14 describes Christ and the heavenly host coming seated on white horses which is to be understood as a metaphor of their triumphant arrival. It does not necessarily mean that Christ will be riding a heavenly horse.

Yet, Christ's sitting on a white cloud, perhaps, should be taken more in an actual sense since Acts 1:11 tells us that he will return on clouds just like he ascended to heaven. Also Rev 1:7, Mt 26:64, and Mk 14:62, where Jesus is interrogated by

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Caiaphas, pictures Christ's return as coming on clouds. Stephenson is pointing to Ex 13:21, 16:10, Nm 11:25, 14:14 where the earthly phenomenon of cloud was an external expression of the presence of the divine Majesty.⁵

Believers must not fear the future return of Christ since His return is the fulfillment of all the Christian hopes. The church militant will be turned into a church triumphant. Those who at all ages were scorning Christians with regard to our hope will be witnesses of the triumph of Christ and of his believers. 2 Peter 3:3-10 describes the situation at the time of coming of Christ that the mouths of scorners will be shut.

There will be no time left for preaching, teaching, baptizing, and repentance. Since it will be a supernatural extra focal event, Christ's coming will catch the unbelievers by surprise. Matt 24:27 and Lk 17:24 compares Christ's coming to a lightning "*that lights out of the one part of the heaven unto the other part unto heaven.*"

The consummation of this age will come unexpected and as a thief (Matt 24:44).

1 Thess 5:2. Dr. Luther in an Advent sermon emphasizes that a thief comes exactly at a time when he is the least feared and the least awaited. A thief's visit is always a shocking and a very unpleasant surprise. That is exactly what Christ's sudden appearance in the world will be for unbelievers who had been feeling themselves most secure.

Dr. Francis Pieper in a footnote to his *Christian Dogmatics* warns that Christ's coming will be so sudden and unexpected that (given the general idea that the Savior should be awaited facing to the East) Europe will not be able to flash word of his coming to America.⁶ Consequently, flashing of word will not be possible in the opposite direction either.

Part III: Millennialism—a Popular Error with regard to the Second Coming of Christ

There are many treatises in which the false idea of a one thousand year reign of Christ on this earth before the Final

⁵Stephenson, *Eschatology*; p. 99

⁶Pieper, Francis, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. III; p. 516; footnote Nr. 30

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Judgment of Christ is defeated. First we must turn to the Augsburg Confession which states: "*Rejected, too, are certain Jewish opinions which are even now making an appearance and which teach that, before the resurrection of the dead saints and godly men will possess a worldly kingdom and annihilate the godless.*"⁷

The chiliastic ideas are almost as old as chapter 20 of the Book of Revelation. Apostolic fathers like Papias and Barnabas held to millennialistic views. It was partly derived from Jewish idea that the world would last 6,000 years, as foreshadowed in the six days of creation. Then would follow a millennium of Christ's rule, after which the eternity as an eighth day will enter the history.⁸

Also the first century Ebionist⁹ Jewish sect held to the millennialistic earthly rule of Christ.¹⁰ The second century church father Irenaeus was a moderate millennialist. He explains his millennialistic expectations in his doctrinal work *Adversus haereses*.¹¹

St. Augustine taught that the figure of one thousand years could be understood in two ways which both are not to be understood as millennialistic. He wrote that the thousand years must be understood either as a time which is left until the Judgment Day, or as an equivalent of the whole duration of the world.¹² Even his second opinion does not contradict the orthodox understanding of one thousand years.

Dr Heiko A. Oberman in his book "*Luther, Man Between God and the Devil*" writes of the dispensationalism in the Middle Ages in connection with the monastic movement. After the death of St. Francis of Assisi, Pope John XXII condemned the strict principle of poverty as it was demanded from the monks by St. Francis in his testament.

⁷CA, XVII

⁸Heglund, Bengt; *History of Theology*, p. 23

⁹In Hebrew *the poor*

¹⁰*History of Theology*, p. 32

¹¹*Ibid*; p. 51

¹²St. Augustin, *The City of God*, p. 720

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The Pope did so in order to preserve his ecclesiastic power. The conflict between the ascetic movement of the Franciscans and the Pope grew deeper. The struggle for poverty was connected with a hope for a millennium. The monks believed that soon there must be an end to the papal hierarchy, its greed and vainglory, and that the Friars Minor (the little, humble brethren) will rule the church for a thousand years.

About the time of St. Francis' death in 1226 Joachim of Fiore laid the foundation of the millennialist teaching which flourished in the Middle Ages. He taught that the history of church (humankind) follows a trinitarian pattern: the age of a Father which would correspond to the Old Testament period; the age of a Son and of a clerical church; and the age of a Holy Spirit—the spiritual church, which would last for a thousand years and that would be the era of dedicated friars.

The papacy fought against this teaching merely because that teaching allowed a thought that there will be a time on earth when the papal hierarchy would not be in power. Petrus Johannes Olivi (died in 1298) taught that the age of Holy Spirit was introduced by St. Francis, just as John the Baptist introduced the age of Christ.

In different parts of Europe many Hussites and Wycliffites allied themselves with millennialistic convictions. At first also Luther was well received by the camp of millennialists. Yet, he soon disappointed them because he was not interested in social changes which would have brought in the Christ's rule according to millennialists like Thomas Muenzer.¹³

A scriptural basis for millennialism is non-existent. Dr. Siegbert Becker in his commentary on the Revelation of John translates and explains the figurative meaning of the number of one thousand years, which in Rev 20:4 stands for the entire New Testament era. Also he proves the dispensationalist idea of two (or more) resurrections to be false. Dr. Becker writes that the "first" resurrection referred to in Rev 20:6 is a reference to what happened when spiritual life is given, and that 1 Th 4:16 is not to

¹³Oberman, Heiko; Luther, *Man Between God and the Devil*, pp. 57-61

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be understood as a proof for a false assumption of two separate resurrections in connection with Rev 20:5,6.¹⁴

Dr. Becker points out that if the dead Christians would be raised at the beginning of the thousand years, it would contradict Christ's words in John 6:39,40 where Jesus promises to raise all the believers at the last day, namely one day, not many days.¹⁵

Stephenson states, "*Not only does dispensationalism concoct a fictitious signs of our Lord's coming through its fantasies concerning God's purposes with respect to ethnic Jews; it also breeds errors under the headings of the parousia, the general resurrection of the dead, the last judgment, and even heaven itself. What Scripture presents as unitary events are transformed by dispensationalism into multiple happenings.*"¹⁶

At first glance the millennialistic false ideas look, perhaps, less harmful than the false views, for example, in the area of the doctrine of justification. Yet, the entire Christian doctrine by its character is not a collection of different biblical beliefs, but all the biblical articles of faith are in unity and they form a firm and single truth.

Therefore millennialism not only equips Christians with false hopes with regard to the last things and the end times, but could also affect doctrines of the original sin, the justification and the sanctification, perhaps, the means of grace, too. Since with this false fragmentation of God's coming grace the trust in the immediacy of God's grace and its application to sinners in the Baptism and the Lord's Supper are negatively affected, putting an emphasis on outward deeds of people bringing about the Kingdom of God instead of trust in God's declaration that He has pardoned the world because He has punished his son instead.

¹⁴1 Thessalonians 4:16,17 teaches that at Christ's coming first the dead in Christ shall be raised and then they will join in heaven with the living believers. From the context it is clear that there is no reference to two separate resurrections. In these passages Paul is speaking only of the believers. The resurrection of the unbelievers is left outside of the picture there.

¹⁵Becker, Siegbert W., *Revelation*; pp. 304-311

¹⁶Stephenson, John; *Eschatology*; p. 83

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One believing in the fragmentation of God's Second Advent could be led to a false perception of Christ's proximity to every single soul of a believer. Millennialists willingly or unwillingly make Christ a more worldly King and emphasize worldly political events and personalities over a small remnant of true believers.

For millennialists world politics and the power position of the church in the worldly battles are more important than the Christian doctrine and the confessions of the church, since they are concerned with a battle of Gog and Magog. And this battle (depending on which group of millennialists they belong to) they perceive more as a World War of some sort.

Dispensationalists in their understanding of the events around the thousand-year rule of Christ are not united. Not delving in their different interpretations too deeply, we could classify the millennial camp as *Premillennial*, *Postmillennial* and *Praeterist*.

[Dispensational] Premillennialism sets two different and unequal salvation programs: one for the Jews, the other for the rest of nations. They hold that the future redeemed Israel will be the center of government and spreading of the Gospel to the nations of the world. In this they reject the truth that Christ already has come to redeem Israel, and that He is now the King and the ruler.

Postmillennialism teaches that before the coming of Christ there will be a golden age for the church. They neglect the fact that Christ already rules in this old eon through the Word and Sacraments. This understanding corresponds with the millennial hopes of the friars and mendicant monks of the Middle Ages.

Preterist views prophecies as already fulfilled.¹⁷ Preterists spiritualize Mt 24 as having already taken place in the past and believe that Christ actually returned to Jerusalem in 70 AD, fulfilling the prophecy of the Second Advent. These false views represent different hermeneutics and different types of exegesis. These positions differ not only in methodology but also in the way they understand biblical history.

¹⁷*praeter*, lat. before

Part IV: Concerning the Evidence that we are living at the End Times

End times, the final age, the latter days, the time afterward of the days, in days to come—all of these are biblical terms stated in the Old and the New Testament in Hebrew and in Greek. Is 2:2 definitely speaks of the Messianic age: “*It shall come to pass **in the latter days** that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains. . . and all the nations shall flow to it.*”

Also Micah 4:1 repeats the very same words. Hosea 3:5 prophesies: “. . . and they (the children of Israel) shall come in fear to the LORD and to his goodness **in the latter days**.” In the Old Testament this phrase is used also to denote some closer future events which will befall the people, like in Num 24:14, Jer 48:47, Ez 38, Dan 10:14, all of which are warnings of the consequences of ungodliness.

Since it is true, that we cannot guess the time for the judgment day, why then may we claim to be living in the end times? The quoted passages from the Old Testament state that there will be end times without specifying the starting point in time. Then we must further consult the Scripture.

Heb 1:2 and Jl 2:28 denote the entire Messianic age beginning with the incarnation of Christ and the Pentecost as the latter days or end time. Joel 2:28 says “*And it shall come to pass afterward that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh . . .*” That was fulfilled on the Pentecost day according to Peter’s first sermon in Acts 2:17. Hebrews 1:1,2 denotes the end times as the entire Messianic age, “*In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son . . .*”¹⁸

The Apostles themselves believed that they were living in the very end days. Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 describes how those living believers at the time of Christ’s Second Advent will be caught up in the clouds together with the resurrected ones. He writes “*we who are alive, who are left,*” most likely Paul means himself and his contemporaries.

¹⁸All English quotes are from R.S.V.

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Secondly, there are special signs which are to remind all the New Testament era people that we actually are living in the end times or latter days. Christ promises these special signs for the latter days in Mt 24:4-14 (also the synoptic passages of Mark and Luke). History provides a proof for us that ever since the times of the apostles it is the latter days, because there have risen countless false prophets, there have been endless wars, there have been famines and earthquakes.

There has been a constant persecution of the genuine Christian doctrine at almost all the New Testament era periods. Countless Christians have fallen from faith because of the false doctrine, and wickedness is so multiplied that the faith of many has grown cold. Yet, a remnant of faith is present and the Gospel is still preached in the world.

So we must believe that we are living in end times and one day the end will come for the world unexpectedly as a thief. Dr. Luther in one of his Epiphany sermons, is speaking of the special signs mentioned by Christ: earthquakes, flood, astronomical signs, and he states that “the fool” Aristotle and all his followers describe such signs as natural.

Luther also states that whatever the world and all the scientists say, and regardless of the scientific explanation of such signs, Christians should hold onto Christ’s words that these are God’s provided special signs warning and also comforting the people of God that we are living in the end times. Luther’s reliance on Scripture is rather striking: *“The course of the heavens has been so arranged from eternity that before the last day these signs must appear; by God has created none that is not a token of future evil. Thus also the blind leader Aristotle, writing a book about the phenomena of the heavens, attributes all to nature and declares these are no signs. Our learned men follow him and thus one fool fills the world with fools. Let us know that though the heavenly bodies wander in their courses according to law, God has still made these to be signs or tokens of his wrath.”*¹⁹

¹⁹Luther’s *Church Postil*, Vol. X; p. 66

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Part V. How a Christian should Await our Savior

A Christian is living in this world but does not belong to it since a Christian is a citizen of the new eon which has come with Christ. It is easy to say but it is not so easy to live. The Bible teaches that a Christian should be submissive not only to the agents of the Kingdom of God (His Word and the sacraments) but also to the authorities of this world. Therefore this world still has a certain strong domain in our life, in our body and also in our soul not only according to our sinful nature but also according to our regenerated nature.

In fact Christians every day mostly go around taking care of their worldly business, even the most devout ones and even those who labor on behalf of the church as its spiritual leaders. Just think how much time of our life all together is spent just taking care of various bureaucratic issues which are provided by state and local governments as mandatory.

Luther's wit burst out saying that God sustains this time and energy-consuming secular state in order to remind people that we are not yet in Paradise. We may say that especially the modern bureaucrats have success in proving that Luther was right.

Yet, people have to do their duties pertaining to this world. Therefore, as our worldly duties grow more complicated, as they multiply day by day, and as they become more time-consuming, so also grows the tension inside a Christian since we belong to and we long for the other kingdom and our very daily existence testifies to the conflict between the two worlds.

However, it is not that we can perceive the coming of the age of perfection and immortality exclusively in faith. Perhaps we may even say that it is not that we live awaiting Christ's Second Advent only by faith in unseen and promised things alone, but our faith in invisible promises of God are sustained also by seeing and perceiving, because Christ has provided signs of the end times which we can see and which we can experience.

We see and experience disastrous things in nature, threatening comets, falling asteroids, meteorites and darkening of the sun and of the moon; we see apostasy, we see wars and violence, terrorism and killing of the innocent; we see gross immorality,

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corruption and a perverted way of life; we see even corruption inside of the church. These signs announce the presence of the mortal and sinful age.

God has provided that we may experience his promised signs and thus find even a comfort, so that we can joyfully and eagerly await our Savior. Stephenson organizes all the scriptural signs of the latter days under four divisions. First, are the signs of God's judgment in the present. Even though the execution of God's wrath in full will happen on the Judgment Day, Rom 1:18 states that the divine anger against the iniquity is being manifested already in the present.²⁰ Christians often suffer because of those ungodly people who despise the Ten Commandments.

On the contrary, the unbelieving world, when experiencing the consequences of sin, always raises a question of theodicy asking how things like threatening pestilences, famines, all "natural" disasters, are reconcilable with the existence of the God of love. After the terrors of World War II the secular and atheistic minds accused the traditional Christianity of excluding the human freedom and the sense of responsibility for this world. Therefore, the hope for the future of the postmodern time was put on purely secular and humanistic principles.²¹ We must understand that God exercises all these terrifying divine judgments as anticipations of the last judgment.²²

Second, in the world there are signs of rebellion against God. People despise God's gift of life, murdering unwanted children. The evidence sought by the liberals that there is an enduring positive result of some dialectic of morals does not exist. The two World Wars, death camps during Nazi and Soviet rule, present-time terrorism and criminal violence speak just the opposite.

The true Christian doctrine of Original Sin, all the miracles of the Bible, the doctrine of Justification, the authority of the Scriptures, and many other Biblical truths had been questioned and rejected not only by the unbelievers but also by theologians. All kinds of sins against the Sixth Commandment are being publicly advertised and they have a tendency to multiply. Accordingly,

²⁰*Eschatology*; pp. 65,66

²¹Grenz, S; Olson, R; *XXth Century Theologi*; p. 170

²²*Eschatology*; p. 66

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the family institution is not valued as it should be and an ever-increasing divorce rate is a sign of today.

Third, there are signs of rebellion inside the church. In his letter to the Christians of Stassburg against the enthusiasts Luther writes that Christ must not only have Caiaphas among his foes, but also Judas among his friends.²³ Ever since the first century Gnostics, Arians, latter day enthusiastic spirits, papists, Calvinists, baptists, rationalists, pietists, Bible critics and all kinds of sectarians and Universalists, the heresy as a rebellion against the truth of God has been present. For many in church all kinds of false teachings had been more appealing to the sinful flesh than the truth of God. *“For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and they will lead many astray.”* (Mt 24:5)

Fourth is the sign of preaching the Gospel in the whole world. Not diving into a discussion of how much of this very special sign belongs to the realized eschatology and how much there is left for the inaugurated eschatology to carry on, it is clear that this sign obliges also us to preach the Gospel to the world. This mission is to be understood in a wider sense of the word.

So many theologians have tried to blend Christian doctrine with modern secular philosophy and concepts, emptying it of truths unacceptable to the proud sinful human mind. But on the contrary and in spite of all the rejection of Christ and His doctrine, we hear the Word of God still proclaimed and we see believers in the midst of the unbelieving world.

These facts, both the dreadful signs and the presence of the Gospel in the world, serve as signs which testify of the immediate presence of God's kingdom and of its conflict with the sinful world. It proves the apocalyptic vision of the Bible concerning the end times of this world to be true. Consequently, the existing evidence for the biblical truth in this age is serving as a proof that also Christ's words concerning the things which are yet to come are true.

Dr. Luther, in his Advent sermon on the text from Lk 21, where Luke records Christ's words that at the end times men will be “fainting for fear” seeing the signs of the end times, writes, *“For*

²³*Eschatology*; p. 74

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*Christ speaks as if he would separate the fear and the things which they fear; and so divides these that he gives to them the fear and to the world the things which they fear. It is to be presumed that by this fear and anxiety, they are to have their hell and death here, while the world, which fears nothing, will have death and hell hereafter.*²⁴

The paradox is that this world, which is full of trouble, teaches and gives Christians the evidence that Christ's Second Advent is to be awaited eagerly and sincerely. A cross always follows the confession of the Christian faith and a godly life. This in fact proves that a believer is in real conflict with the beliefs and values of this world.

The devil's temptation for a Christian is to leave his faith and his cross of a confessor of faith and to cling to the promises and the opportunities of this world. It had been true at all times, yet the devilish pressure from the secular unbelieving world today becomes even more intense.

Since the numbers of Christians are diminishing in that part of the world which traditionally had been called Christian, it becomes much more difficult to stand in faith against the pressure from the unbelieving part of the society. It is especially true for those believers who represent the confession of faith of the minority in communities where they live.

That is true of my country Latvia as well as the entire European Union. Materialism, cult of flesh, immorality, heathen and occult practices or quasi-Christian universalism at the best is shaping the spiritual portrait of most of Europe today.

Recently, after the death of Pope John Paul II, all the media were crowded with the information of his death and burial. Even Latvian Radio One, which is a state-owned radio station, was announcing after a week of the burial that finally the access to the grave site of the Pope is open for the public, obviously suggesting pilgrimage of some sort. The first page of "Svetdienas Rīts,"²⁵ the official media of the liberal Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church, on the day when the new Pope Benedict the

²⁴Luther's *Church Postil*, Vol. X; p. 72

²⁵"Sunday Morning" in Latvian

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XVIth was introduced to the world, announced in huge bold print: "We have a Pope".

The pope tastelesly is being pictured as the father of all Christianity and even above that. This is a dreadful reality which corresponds with the Apocalypse of John which the Lord allowed him to see on the island of Patmos two thousand years ago. The Babylonian harlot (Revelation, Chapters 17 and 18), which is the institution of papacy according to Lutheran exegesis, demonstrated herself shamelesly. Secular powers literally bowed before the dead and also the new leader of the apostate institution of Rome.

Dr. Siegbert W. Becker writes in his commentary on the Book of Revelation, "*Babylon, then is a name not only for the antichristian forces at work in the visible church of the New Testament, but also of the Old Testament. Most of the prophets who were killed during the course of the Old Testament were not slain by the heathen nations but by men who outwardly called themselves God's people and yet had apostasized from the true God.*"²⁶

Apostates and false prophets are even more numerous than ever and they are deceiving many. With this situation in mind and also taking into account the terrible destiny which awaits this world Apostle Peter writes, "*Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of persons ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God.*" (2 Peter 3:11,12)

Paul writes to Titus these words, "*For the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men, training us to renounce irreligion and worldly passions, and to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world, awaiting 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 iniquity and to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.*" (Titus 2:11-14)

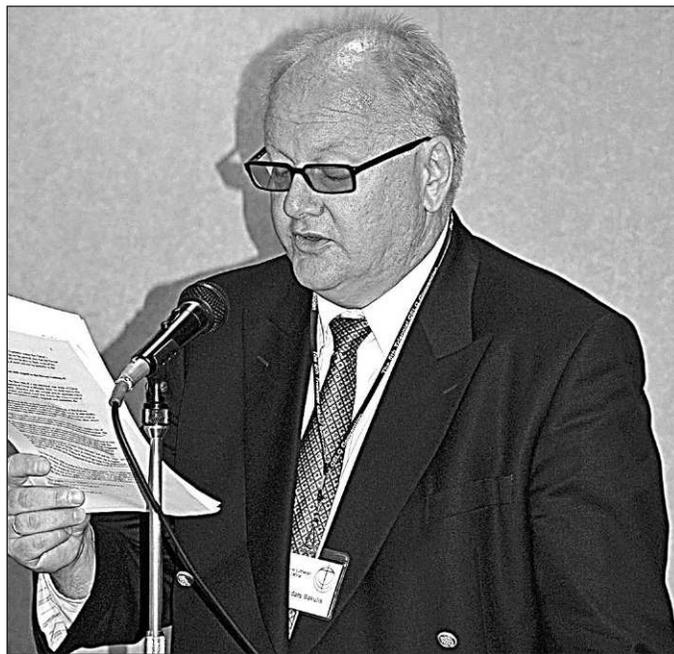
No comment is necessary since these and many similar texts in the letters of the Apostles are self-explanatory. However, for a

²⁶Becker, *Revelation*; p. 277

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sinful man, even for a sincere and devout Christian, this is not easy to read without fear since our godly lives are stained by many sins. Encouraging and putting straight the purpose of Christ's coming Luther writes, "*Fear must pass out of the soul and there must enter in a desire for righteousness and for that day. But if you really desire to be free from sin and to be holy, then give thanks to God and continue to desire to be more free from sin. . . . There is no one so well prepared for the judgment day as he who longs to be without sin. If you have such desire, what do you fear? You are then in perfect accord with the purpose of that day.*"²⁷

Yet, a Christian does not have to fear the threatening signs of our Lord's coming. The people of our churches must be reminded of the words of Luther, that the Lord has separated



Gundars Bakulis of Latvia

²⁷Luther's *Church Postil*, Vol. X; pp. 76,77

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the fear from what is feared and the sorrow of a believer will be turned into joy soon.

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Essay #4:
**Eagerly Await the Savior
even though You Must Face Divine Judgment**

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Contents:

1. Who will be judged on Judgment Day?
2. Who will be the Judge?
3. The basis of judgment and the use of evidence in the judging.
4. The reality and eternity of condemnation in hell.
Popular errors: The denial of hell or limiting the duration of hell
5. The Christian's attitude in anticipating standing before the judgment seat of Christ.

Dear brethren from all over the world, greetings in our Lord Jesus Christ. Glory to our merciful Lord who unites us through His Holy Word.

We rejoice that this CELC convention is able to be held in Japan. We thank our gracious Lord who will bless us through our studies and gives us opportunities to gather even in this world to worship Him and to encourage one another.

O Lord, we ask you to strengthen us with the armor of your Word so that we together may continue to stand fast against all temptations. We live in a world with many misleading teachings, especially about Judgment Day. Please bless our Bible study today, remind us of your clear Word, and increase our wisdom and faith. Help us be servants who await your second coming with joy and thanks, and not with fear or despair. Amen.

1. Who will be judged on Judgment Day?

The connection between the judgment and resurrection.

At first, let us consider who will be judged on Judgment Day? This question is closely related with the question who will be

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raised from the dead? The Lord encourages us concerning the believer's resurrection with many passages throughout the Bible. (Isaiah 26:19, Luke 20:35, John 11:25,26, Philippians 3:11)

The resurrection of the unbeliever is also mentioned in many verses. The Gospel of John said "Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice, and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation." (John 5:28,29) Paul also declared before Felix, "But this I confess to you, that according to the Way which they call a sect, so I worship the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the Law and in the Prophets. I have hope in God, which they themselves also accept, that there will be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust." (Acts 24:14,15 cf. Daniel 12:2)

Thus, believers and unbelievers both will certainly be present on Judgment Day. The Bible says, "He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters abroad." (Matthew 12:30) The atheists who hope there is no God and the agnostic who has doubt about the existence of God will also without exception be the subjects of judgment. So the question is, "Who will be judged on Judgment Day?" The very fact that all nations will be raised is not an unrelated subject. All human beings will be raised and all will be judged.

Believers in Christ will, of course, enter heaven with glorious bodies and receive eternal life. Unbelievers will enter hell to be punished forever and will suffer punishment in their bodies, but their bodies will never be destroyed or disappear. Thus, we reject all false teachings, which says that unbelievers will never be raised. If that were so, unbelievers in their bodies would not be subject to the Judgment. Unbelievers will be judged and punished in both body and soul.

All people and the angels who sinned are subject to the judgment.

Will there be a choice whether one appears before the Judgment Seat of God or not? There will be no choice! Everyone must stand before the Christ for judgment. Scripture makes this clear. "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body,

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according to what he has done, whether good or bad.” (2 Corinthians 5:10) “But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. For it is written: ‘As I live,’ says the Lord, ‘Every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall confess to God.’” (Romans 14:10,11) “And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment,” (Hebrew 9:27; Matthew 25:32; Acts 17:31).

Not only those who still live on the Last Day, but also the dead will be judged as 1 Timothy 4:1 says, “I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom.” All people who ever lived and still live will be judged. No one will be overlooked! No one can escape from the judgment! “‘Can anyone hide himself in secret places, so I shall not see him?’ says the Lord; ‘Do I not fill heaven and earth?’ says the Lord.” (Jeremiah 23:24) No sin will be hidden from the Lord. “And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.” (Hebrew 4:13, Luke 12:2) The angels who sinned will also experience the carrying out of the final judgment. “For if God did not spare the angels who sinned, but cast them down to hell and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment.” (2 Peter 2:4; Matthew 8:29) Besides the evil angels, those who are to be judged are all human beings, without exception. Christians, non-Christians, (2 Corinthians 5:10; Romans 14:10) those who are living and those who are dead and evil angels too. (Acts 10:42, 2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6)

Christians are also subject to the judgment.

The teaching that “Christians will never be judged” is a distortion of God’s Word. In Japan, the word “judgment” makes a fearful impression. People think that the word “judgment” should only be used for criminals. This distortion of the Bible may be caused by such a misinterpretation, but the original Greek meaning for “judgment” includes “to separate” and “to give a decision.” As Matthew 13:24-30 indicates, Christians will be finally separated from the “tares (weeds),” and also all the effects of sin such as death, sorrows, troubles, burdens, illness, false teachings, etc. The meaning of separation or handing

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down a decision doesn't leave a bad impression regarding the word "judgment." Rather for the believer being separated from all evil is something to look forward to. "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt." (Daniel 12:2) If Christians would not be judged by Christ in the sense of receiving a verdict of not guilty, that would be one of the greatest tragedies. Therefore Christians may call judgment day "the day of redemption, the day of delight" as well as "the last day" (Ephesians 4:30, Isaiah 63:4).

But we sometimes come across Bible passages like "whoever believes in Him is not condemned" (John 3:18, 5:24, Romans 14:22) You may be confused by this contradiction, but this outward contradiction is from the application of "Law and Gospel". According to the Law, everyone has to stand before Christ's judgment seat, but according to the Gospel, believers will not be condemned. Believers who stand before the judgment seat of Christ will not have any guilt to be condemned for, because all their sins have been forgiven through faith in Jesus' redeeming work. The Bible doesn't have any contradictions (John 17:17), even about the Judgment. Here, too, Christ applies the teaching of the Law and the Gospel. Since all Christians still have an "old Adam", the Law is a warning. (2 Corinthians 5:10; Romans 14:10)

Article 17 of the Augsburg Confession also shows this very clearly. A Jewish teaching tells us that before the resurrection the saints will establish an earthly kingdom and annihilate godless people. Such a teaching is the same or very similar to present day Chiliastic teachings (millennialism). On the basis of Scripture we cannot accept such teachings.

2. Who will be the Judge?

The Judge, Jesus Christ.

We confess in the 2nd article of the Apostle's Creed that "He (Jesus) shall come to judge the living and the dead." The Bible clearly teaches us who will be the Judge. "And He commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead." (Acts 10:42) Jesus told the Jews that the Father gave

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Him the authority to be the Judge of all. “. . . and has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man.” (John 5:27) From other passages, it is an obvious fact that the Father chose the Son of Man as the representative of this great authority. Paul writes, “I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom.” (1 Timothy 4:1) “When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left.” (Matthew 25:31-33; Acts 10:42; John 5:22; 2 Corinthians 5:10)

Jesus stood in front of Caiaphas and Pilate and was judged by them. They condemned Him as guilty, although He never committed any sins, and people heaped abuse on Him crying, “Crucify him!” But finally, He Himself will judge all the living and all the dead, the evil angels, even Caiaphas, Pilate and the multitudes, including the Roman soldiers who whipped Him, on the last day.

But we cannot strictly say that this role of judgment is separated from God the father, since we cannot divide each person of the Triune God strictly. And the judgment of Jesus is never different from the Father and the Holy Spirit. (John 5:30, 10:30) Therefore, in a wide sense we can say that the Triune God is the judge on the last day.

The Righteous ones will be given this authority too.

The righteous ones, in other words, Christians will also judge the world with Christ. That is a plain doctrine of the Bible. “Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world will be judged by you, are you unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, things that pertain to this life?” (1 Corinthians 6:2,3) “And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them.” (Revelation 20:4) “So Jesus said to them, ‘Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have fol-

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lowed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” (Matthew 19:28; Luke 22:29,30)

But we also have to remember the following Bible passage. “There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy. Who are you to judge another?” (James 4:12) So the righteous do not use this authority of judgment according to each one’s own will. We who are recognized as righteous by God’s grace, will be raised, and judged, and be made righteous having the perfect “image of God,” “who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.” (Philippians 3:21) That is why we who will have received God’s perfect image and are in perfect harmony with God’s will, will never judge differently from the judgment of Jesus Christ, the Judge. Our thoughts and decisions will harmonize perfectly with Christ’s will and judgment.

Since we will approve and cooperate with Christ’s decisions and judgment, Christians will also judge the world and evil angels. We are not told the details about this authority, but let us be sure of this fact and rejoice in this great honor. This great honor, which Christ gives us by grace, moves us to judge our brothers and sisters rightly also in this earthly life. We who have been saved by grace through Jesus Christ, must judge every thing in this world according to God’s Word.

3. The basis of judgment and the use of evidence in the judging.

The basis of judgment is not according to the Law.

Judgment in this world is according to the law of a government. If Jesus also judges people according to the Law, every single man is guilty without exception. And all of us will be punished with eternal death in hell. “Do not enter into judgment with your servant, for in your sight no one living is righteous.” (Psalm 143:2) “But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment.” (Matthew 12:36; Romans 14:12; 2 Corinthians 5:10) These passages show and also emphasize for us that no one would be guiltless before God, if we would be judged by the Law. “Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in

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His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.” (Romans 3:20) “But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for the just shall live by faith.” (Galatians 3:11)

But let us no longer fear the Day of Judgment! Christ said that he would not judge us by the Law. If He would, His work of redemption for the whole world and His resurrection would lose all their meaning. (1 Corinthians 15:17-18)

The basis of judgment is according to the Gospel.

Jesus tells us in John 12:48 “The word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day.” What is the “Word?” It is the Gospel (Romans 2:16). Did a person accept the Gospel in faith? (Subjective Righteousness) Or did he reject the Gospel? In other words God will judge a person individually according to his or her attitude toward the Gospel. “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.” (Mark 16:16) “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment.” (John 5:24) He will “give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes, in that day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed.” (2 Thessalonians 1:7-10) In short, the destiny of every person depends on this point, that is, whether a person in this life believes the Gospel of Christ or not. That is the all important thing! Those who believe in Christ will never be condemned in sin. That’s it! (John 5:24) That’s the Gospel, and it is the power of God unto salvation! (Romans 1:16,17)

But many people have questions about this very point. The Bible tells us that we are saved through faith in Christ by grace, not by our work or virtue. (Ephesians 2:8,9) We find some passages in the Bible, such as Matthew 25, which seem to tell us that our salvation depends on our deeds. Does it indicate a contradiction about the basis of judgment and salvation?

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Why does the Bible speak as if good deeds are the basis of judgment? Because human deeds are the official fruits of our faith and will show faith or unfaithfulness in Christ.

When the Bible sometimes seems to show that good deeds are the basis of judgment, we may be confused about the basis for judgment, if we don't remember all of God's Word. (Matthew 25:35-44; Revelation 20:12; John 5:28,29; James 2:24) Our Lord looks into the heart. (1 Samuel 16:7) Human thoughts and motives themselves can not be seen by humans, but are seen by the Lord (1 Corinthians 4:5; Hebrew 4:12,13). They will show their thoughts and motives by the deeds they produce. Such deeds are the public evidence of our faith. "Without faith it is impossible to please God." (Hebrew 11:6) True good deeds are then public fruits coming from faith in Christ. "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing." (John 15:5) "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love." (Galatians 5:6) "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." (Galatians 5:22) "Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." (James 2:17,26)

We may be confused by the letter of James, if we ignore the context and the circumstances when this letter was written. James admonishes people who knew the facts about being saved by faith, but they were in danger of abusing God's grace. Some of the people were tempted to believe that they did not need to do any good works. James says that such a faith without works is dead, and is not true faith. In that case there is no faith that remains in the heart. A faith without action is dead.

When we hear the "fruits of faith," most Christians are apt to imagine outreach in the form of mission work or some deeds of services to other people or devout prayers. But even when the deeds seem to be a small thing to us, if the deed comes from the faith in Christ, then it becomes a wonderful service and worship of God. A confession of faith in word or deed is also a good work, as 2 Corinthians 4:13 says; "I believed, therefore I have spoken." Even if it is not an eloquent confession with beautiful words and delivery in human eyes, but simply a con-

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fession made from a believing heart, it would be a fruit of faith, which pleases God. (Luke 21:1-4, Hebrew 11:4) Jesus pointed to the simple faith of little children (literally in Greek, “infant, baby at the breast”) as an appropriate example of the saving faith of those who enter the kingdom of God. (Luke 18:15-17, Psalm 8:2) We tend to judge public deeds by their type, greatness, and quantity, but the Lord’s basis for Judgment on the Last Day is not like that of human beings.

Bible scholars who are familiar with the Bible, people who come to Sunday service, every week, those who were baptized . . . even they will stand at left of Christ’s judgment seat unless they believe in Jesus Christ as their own Savior. The place at the left of Christ’s judgment throne pictures being declared guilty. On the other hand, those like the tax collector, the adulterous woman, the crucified criminal and also others who were criminals, even right before their deaths, will stand at the right hand of Christ if they believe in Jesus. All who believe in Jesus as their own Savior from eternal death will stand at the right of Christ. Being placed at the right of Christ pictures being declared not guilty.

Against those who don’t believe in Jesus.

Those who are condemned will not be judged according to each sin they have committed (James 2:10). The Judge will also look into their hearts in this case. If he has no faith in Christ, he never bears fruit which is God pleasing. Not what are “good works” in our sight, but rather what Jesus, the Judge, will see as “good works” which flow from “faith in Him” will be the basis of judgment. If a person doesn’t do good works in Christ, it means that he has no faith in Jesus the Savior. “But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?” (James 2:20) Jesus says, “No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.” (John 15:4) “Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God calls Jesus accursed, and no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit.” (1 Corinthians 12:3)

Unbelief is a sin. But it is not true that people are not saved because of their sins. All sins are forgiven through Jesus’

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redemption. The reason why people are not saved is because they reject their Savior, and they do not accept “the garments of salvation” that is “the robe of righteousness” which the Savior offers them. (Isaiah 61:10, Matthew 10:33) Because unbelievers reject the grace of salvation from Christ, they stay under the wrath of God, which is caused by their sins. “For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.” (Ephesians 5:5,6) “Therefore, I said to you that you will die in your sins; for if you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins.” Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for if you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins.” (John 8:24)

Isaiah 13:9-13 is a powerful warning from God for the people who do not accept God’s mercy. “I will punish the world for its evil, the wicked for their sins.” Therefore, they have to accept this fact: that by God’s abundant mercy, Jesus alone fully became the Lamb of God for all people who deserve to be punished for their sins. Of Jesus the Bible clearly says, “He who gave himself as a ransom for all men.” (1 Timothy 2:6; John 3:16; 1 John 2:2; Titus 2:11; Hebrew 2:9)

Their sins also have been forgiven. In Japan, when someone causes a car accident, he will be exempt from further punishment as long as he pays the fine before the dead line. Of course his sin is not forgiven in this case, but if he rejects paying the fine, which is the only way to be released, he has to receive from further punishment as a natural result. Likewise those who will be condemned have rejected the only way to be saved. By rejecting the only Defense Counsel of the Savior and His payment for their sins which can save them, they will bring eternal death on themselves. (Zechariah 3:1-5; 2 Corinthians 5:19-21)

But we have to remember that we are not saved because of our faith, as a good work or because of its intrinsic value. Faith in Christ is also a gift from God and it is God’s work. The Bible says, “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent.” (John 6:29,44,65; Ephesians 2:8,9) The object of our faith is the True Savior. The one whom we believe in is the

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Almighty One from whom we have a promise. He and His Words are the object of our faith and He, the Lord Jesus Christ, is the sole cause and reason why we are saved!

False teaching about this doctrine

Thus far, we have accepted the fact that all human beings deserve to be judged by Jesus. No one can take another's punishment for sins; no one can gain salvation for himself or another by his own virtue and good works.

In Japan we have a proverb saying "In ga warui." It means that someone has to shoulder a burden for the penalty of the sin which one's parents or relatives or ancestors caused. The Jews too had this mistaken idea. The Bible points that out in John 9:1-7, Ezekiel 18:1-4,20. It is a wrong way of thinking. Nobody can undertake the responsibility for your sins or mine. Only Jesus Christ, the Son of God, undertook our sins and perfectly removed the penalty for everyone's sins. (Psalm 49:7-9,15; Matthew 11:28) The Roman Catholic Church teaches as a basis of judgment that "God will judge by His love." If they say "God's love" is "the Gospel of Christ", then there would be no problem, but their definition of God's love is different from the Bible.

I want to again summarize that we have learned so far that each one of us without exception will be judged by Jesus Christ on the Last Day, and the basis of Judgment depends on believing the Gospel of Jesus or not believing. (Mark 16:16; John 12:48-50) According to the pronouncement of judgment, everyone will live either in heaven or in hell eternally.

The Judgment is not an examination.

The Judgment is not an examination of whether a person committed sin or not. Jesus knows! Jesus knows all those who don't believe in Him. "But there are some of you who do not believe. For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who would betray Him." (John 6:64) Jesus also knows all those who do believe. "Nevertheless the solid foundation of God stands, having this seal: 'The Lord knows those who are His,' and, 'Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity.'" (2 Timothy 2:19) Jesus is God, who is eternal and omniscient. By faith in Jesus, we know and have

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confidence that we are saved. And so we have the peace of God. (Romans 5:1)

It will not be on the Last Day that the Judgment for all people will be determined. The outcome of our judgment hinges on believing the Savior at the moment of our death, which brings the time of grace to an end. "And Jesus said to him, 'Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.'" (Luke 23:43) "Then I heard a voice from heaven saying to me, 'Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.'" "Yes," says the Spirit, "that they may rest from their labors, and their works follow them." (Revelation 14:13; John 3:16) Even if you were converted right before your death, if you die having faith in the Savior, you will be placed and stand on the right side of the Judge in front of Judge. But if you die having no faith in the Savior, even if you have believed until right before your death, you will be placed and stand on the left side of the Judge to be punished. Put another way, "death" (namely the end of the time of grace) is the end of the time set for each one of us to receive a place in heaven for eternity. (Luke 16:19-31)

This judgment on the Last Day is the public proclamation of the Judgment. (Matthew 25:34,41) The Judgment is determined when a person dies. "When a wicked man dies, his expectation will perish, and the hope of the unjust perishes." (Proverbs 11:7) "Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life." (Revelation 2:10) If we focus on only our soul, the judgment will be carried out when we die. (Luke 23:43) On Judgment Day, each person will be proclaimed innocent or guilty publicly and formally, and all human beings will be given the decisions of their own judgment, only then, it will involve not only the soul but also the body.

The Judge brings punishments and retributions.

The Judge brings punishments and retributions according to the sins which have been committed. (2 Corinthians 5:10, Romans 2:6-11) When an unbeliever is sentenced to eternal punishment, he will be punished according to the sins that he has committed in his life. (Ephesians 5:5,6) When a believer is proclaimed

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innocent, by grace he will be rewarded according to “the good works” that he has done in his life. (Matthew 5:10-12) “Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.’” (Matthew 25:34)

As Christians who can enter heaven because of Jesus and by His grace, we should not now compromise with any teaching of false doctrine nor should we have as the motivations to do good works the desire to receive greater glory in heaven. We know and rejoice that all is by grace through our Lord Jesus Christ! Let us remember God’s Word and preserve His Word because we love and thank our Lord Jesus Christ. “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word.” (John 14:23,24)

The Judge’s judgment is certainly the right judgment.

No one can complain by saying, “I didn’t have a fair trial.” Jesus says, “My judgment is just” (John 5:30). The basis of the judgment is established by God’s Word, not by human ideas. In Japan, the Supreme Court has the highest authority for all judgments. Just as the judgment from the Supreme Court is the final decision in the land, so the judgment handed down from our Lord, the Ruler of All, and the King who has all authority, is final and will never be overturned. He will never change the basis of the judgment. It’s not unfair at all. The happiest news for all human beings, not only Christians, is that God is determined to use the Gospel in dealing with us. Because everyone has the privilege to receive “forgiveness of all sins” without discrimination, we don’t need to have any insecurity about the future, but we can continually have peace with God in our lives. It is so sad when a person rejects the Gospel and places himself or herself back under the curse of the Law!

4. The reality and eternity of condemnation in hell. Popular errors: The denial of hell or limiting the duration of hell

Fact—Hell is not a made up story or a story from someone’s imagination but is a dreadful reality.

Our Lord himself tells us about hell and eternal suffering in hell. “If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast

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it from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire." (Matthew 18:8,9) "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." (Matthew 10:28) Paul also writes, "These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power." (2 Thessalonians 1:9, Matthew 25,41,46)

A condition of suffering in hell (not complete destruction).

We should listen to what the Bible says about hell rather than imagine about hell. The most fearful punishment of suffering in hell is not complete "destruction, extinction". The word "destroy" in Matthew 10:28 doesn't mean complete destruction. 2 Peter 3:6 also uses the very same word to describe the destruction caused by the flood. As you know, this earth was not completely destroyed by the flood. In the same way, the human body and soul will not be completely destroyed in hell. The teaching that supports the idea of punishment resulting in extinction in hell is not a doctrine based on the teachings of the Bible. The Jehovah's Witnesses deny the immortality of the soul after death, and so they insist that the punishment established for unbelievers is the eternal extinction of the soul.

Hell was originally a place prepared for Satan and his followers. "Then He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'" (Matthew 25:41,46) Matthew 8:12 says, "There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Those passages teach a suffering, a despair, and a wrath from which no one can escape. Those who enter hell are utterly forsaken by God and will never be able to flee from there. The punishment of hell will never be commuted or come to an end, and those in hell will never have even a temporary rest. Their souls and bodies suffer eternally.

Eternal suffering.

Matthew 25:46 says, "And these will go away into everlasting punishment." Also Article XVII of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession states, "the ungodly (are) to be punished with the devil without end." As a Christian's life is filled with God's blessings in heaven which will last forever, so the unbeliever's life will continue to be punished eternally in hell. In the final Judgment, perfect and eternal separation will happen between believer and unbeliever. (Matthew 25:46) Paul tells us that human beings can know from their natural knowledge to a certain degree that there indeed might be eternal punishment. (Roman 1:18-21) The knowledge of God's judgment is a part of God's law which was written in our heart by God. (Roman 1:32) For this reason, we can certainly find the doctrine of eternal punishment even among heathen people, although the doctrine is twisted by human reason or Satan.

The Bible teaches very clearly about the doctrine of eternal punishment. Therefore, if someone denies the doctrine of eternal punishment, it means he is denying God's sacred Word and authority. If a person rejects eternal punishment, he or she must also logically reject eternal life. Both of these are facts, and they stand symmetrically together. (Matthew 25:46, John 3:36)

While the word "everlasting" is sometimes indeed used in a limited sense in the Bible, [i.e., enduring, lasting, for life (Exodus 12:14,21:6)], and in many places where the same word is used it has a very strong meaning, "everlasting, and eternal" (2 Thessalonians 1:9; Matthew 18:8; Mark 3:29). In addition, the Bible refers to the term of everlasting suffering by using words which can't be misunderstood. (Isaiah 66:24; Mark 9:48; Revelation 14:11; 20:10) Though both the Hebrew "Sheol" and Greek "Hades" may indicate the condition of death or the grave (Psalm 16:10; Acts 2:27,31), the exact meaning in the following passages is that it is a place in which unbelievers suffer eternally in miserable circumstances and violent distress that one can hardly express with words. (Deuteronomy 32:22; Psalm 49:14; Proverbs 15:24; Matthew 11:23; Luke 10:15; 16:23)

Although Russellism insists that both Sheol and Hades can not mean hell, we do not try to prove the existence of hell by the

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meaning of these words. The Bible teaches a doctrine of eternal punishment by using another word. The Greek word Gehenna was a name of a valley very near the wall of Jerusalem. It became a garbage dump in which fires continually burned. And so it came to picture hell. (Matthew 5:22; Mark 9:43,44, Luke 12:5) The Bible also uses other expressions in teaching about eternal punishment in hell, as the words of Isaiah 66:24 clearly show. Jesus Himself, who is true God, taught and emphasized the fact of eternal punishment. (Luke 16:23; Mark 3:29) The fact of eternal punishment is also proved by Jesus' descent into hell to proclaim His victory to souls there, many of whom had lived in the Old Testament era but had not believed in Him. (1 Peter 3:18-20)

Therefore The Augsburg Confession with the following words declares condemnation on all people who refuse to believe the doctrine of eternal punishment: "But ungodly men and the devils He will condemn to be tormented without end. They condemn the Anabaptists, who think that there will be an end to the punishments of condemned men and devils. They condemn also others, who are now spreading certain Jewish opinions, that before the resurrection of the dead the godly shall take possession of the kingdom of the world, the ungodly being everywhere suppressed." (Augsburg Confession Article XVII)

If someone raises the objection that eternal punishment is overly dreadful and so it cannot be true, they have to remember the following. It is the God of limitless justice, holiness, and might who punishes justly and eternally all people who reject His grace and are opposed to Him. He is not like a limited human being. Someone may try to comfort himself or herself by saying "God is love, so He will never declare a person guilty of deserving eternal punishment." That is also a grave sin against God. Of course God is love (1 John 4:8), and He wants no one to die and suffer the punishment of hell. That is why God has many times and in many ways been warning human beings regarding hell and its punishment. If God was really cold-hearted, He would not have sent the Savior to suffer hell for us. He would rather have immediately and suddenly sent every human being to hell. The doctrine of eternal punishment must always be based on God's love,

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God's justice, and on God's clear Word which sinful human reason never wants to fully accept.

Essence of eternal punishment.

The Bible clearly teaches us that the form and the essence of the eternal punishment are the eternal expulsion from God's sacred grace and fellowship, that is the eternal separation from God's love and mercy. (Matthew 25:41, 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9) We know that Jesus has been sacrificed for all our sins. He certainly received the same punishment that we all ought to receive. In His anguish in the garden of Gethsemane Jesus cried out, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death." (Matthew 26:38) He also called out from the cross, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46) It is clear that Jesus Himself received punishment in place of our sins. (Isaiah 53:4-6) His Word and suffering tell us that there is certainly suffering in hell, and how fearful and hateful it is to be forsaken by God. Originally human beings were created to have fellowship with God. We can only find real joy, peace, and receive the good and spiritual gifts through this fellowship. (Romans 4:25-5:1, Psalm 17:15, Matthew 11:28, James 1:17) To be forsaken by God means the kind of terrible suffering of body and soul that cannot be expressed by our words.

Hell is worse than a trash can.

Those who go to hell to suffer can't avoid this most fearful punishment. Hell is a place for the people who are abandoned completely by the merciful, loving God. So to speak, it is the same as if they are thrown by God into a fiery trash can. No, it is far worse than being in a burning garbage dump. In the case of a garbage dump, even a burning one, someone might try to pick up some of the rubbish and use it again as is the case with recycling. But in hell, there is absolutely no ray of hope, forever. (Luke 16:19-31)

The fire of hell.

We can not understand fully the nature of the fire and the suffering in hell reported in the Bible. However, we should take note that the Lord expects us to fear and pay attention to these words. It is really unimportant whether the fire of hell is material or non-material. Because even if it has a figurative meaning,

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the word “fire” means something that has indescribable suffering and agony. (Isaiah 66:24) And we cannot compare darkness in hell to darkness on earth. (2 Peter 2:17; Jude 13) Even if it is a figurative meaning, the word “darkness” indicates to an indescribable suffering, fear, and complete despair. It is more useful for people to spend time pondering how to find the way of escape from the suffering of hell and for us to ponder how to better tell others the Gospel truths of God’s Word instead of spending time discussing what the fire in hell really looks like.

In hell, everyone can recognize the Lord.

The endless but just punishment and suffering will force those in hell to recognize the existence of the righteous and omnipotent Judge, the Lord Jesus, as it is written in Luke 16:27,28. Those who have gone into hell seem to know the people in heaven and the eternal blessings which they receive in heaven. (Luke 13:28; 16:23) This would increase their shame and regret.

There is no mitigation for suffering in hell.

“Then he cried and said, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame. And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.’” (Luke 16:24,26) The rich man who was suffering in hell couldn’t receive even a drop of water. The suffering in hell has no end and no mitigation. No one can escape. (Matthew 25:41; Mark 9:48; 2 Thessalonians 1:9) There is no hope in hell at all. (2 Peter 2:17; Jude 13)

Again the Bible tells us about the sufferings in hell using various descriptions. “Trouble and distress.” (Romans 2:9) “Being in torments in Hades.” (Luke 16:23) “I am tormented in this flame.” (Luke 16:24) “If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.” (Mark 9:43,44) “And cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth.” (Matthew 13:50; 8:12) “Their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind” (Isaiah

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66:24). “Who can stand?” (Revelation 6:17), etc. The expressions in the Bible are short, but they use the harshest words possible so that we can begin to imagine the eternal suffering of the bodies and the souls in hell. In fact, it is beyond our reason and understanding, because it has not happened to people who still live in the earth, and it is an eternal matter which we cannot fathom.

The eternal sufferings in hell attack not only body, but also soul. The soul also suffers permanent agony. (Galatians 3:10) They suffer the deepest fear eternally. (Luke 16:27,28) Severest agony also falls upon the cursed soul, right after the soul is separated from its body by death. (Luke 16:23)

In order to describe further the eternal sufferings in hell of the accursed ones, one can separate the sufferings into negative sufferings and positive sufferings. The negative sufferings mean the loss of all the blessings from God (Matthew 25:41), separation from Him and every blessed fellowship (Luke 16:26; Matthew 8:12; Revelation 22:15), separation from the mercy of God (Luke 16:25,26), and the loss of every comfort. (Revelation 6:17)

The positive sufferings are the most severe sufferings of soul (Mark 9:48), i.e., fellowship with the devil and his angels (Matthew 25:41), confinement in hell forever (Matthew 25:30, 1 Peter 3:18-20; Jude 6), and the suffering of fire which always continues and never burns out. (Luke 16:23,24; Revelation 14:10,11; 20:10,15)

A gradation of sufferings in hell.

The sufferings in hell are beyond imagination, but there are apparently some degrees in the sufferings. “And that servant who knew his master’s will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few.” (Luke 12:47,48) That is to say, those who do not accept God’s Word after listening to it, will receive a worse condition when they get to hell. (Matthew 11:16-24) The Bible teaches us clearly about the differences of degree, quality, and standard of punishment. (Matthew 11:24; 23:15, Luke 12:47; 2 Peter 2:17) The sin which receives the worst punishment is a malicious resistance to God’s Gospel. (Matthew 11:16-24)

The place of hell.

Nobody can point out where the place of hell is geographically. We talk about hell as a place according to clear Bible passages. (Luke 16:28, 1 Peter 3:19) But we must not think of the place as material or spatial. We also must not try to decide where the place of hell exists. (The Roman Catholic Church teaches that hell is in the middle of earth.) The Bible doesn't give us full information about this matter. Because the sinful heart is not satisfied with the information God gives us, there are many false teachings regarding hell, some of which even deny the existence of hell. Hell is a place where God, by expelling them from His gracious presence, carries out His eternal and righteous judgment on the people who are deserving of eternal punishment. Let us pray to God, that by leading of the Holy Spirit through the Word, they are lead to the Way to be saved from hell, rather than spending their time working hard on searching for hell's location or denying its reality.

Wrong teachings about hell.

All the religious philosophy except what the Bible teaches us, teach a salvation by works. Therefore, those who believe in "work-righteousness" can never have confidence about their entry into heaven. The false teaching of salvation by works increases the fear of the punishment of sins. (Romans 3:20) People who believe false religious teachings about salvation and also about hell, often have doubts regarding salvation and whether they might go to hell or not. They naturally want to reduce or eliminate the sufferings of hell. Various false teachings regarding salvation and hell are still appearing.

Purgatory.

Purgatory is one of these false teachings. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that there is a "halfway point" between heaven and hell called purgatory and that almost all believers have to go there except for a few very devout Catholic believers. They teach that Jesus' death on the cross is not able to provide 100% cleansing from sin and its consequences. In other words, it is not a sufficient redemption. Therefore, people need to make up the deficit by doing good works and also by suffering in purga-

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tory. Hell is not like purgatory. The fire in hell can not purify sins. Hell is a place for the punishment of sins. One is never improved, that is, made better through receiving eternal punishment in hell. Make no mistake about it. Purgatory is a figment of the imagination of the sinful human heart.

Churches which deny hell.

We deeply regret that there are not only churches that think of eternal punishment in hell incorrectly, but also there are some churches which do not believe in eternal punishment in hell. "Restorationism" insists everything will be restored again as it was like in Eden. Especially, they say that all human beings will be restored. In other words, they teach that all will be saved finally. This idea is also found in "Universalism" and "Unitarian teachings". They insist, "Even if there is a punishment for the unrighteous people in future world, it is rather for rectification, not punishment. Those who are unrighteous are purified, led to goodness and all their sins at last are washed away. Finally, they too all enter heaven. Instead, its the evil angels who are punished." Belief or unbelief in Jesus Christ is not a very important matter for them. Finally, the punishment of sins becomes a means of salvation.

The Sabbath Second Coming Church completely denies both the existence of hell and punishment after death and teaches unrighteous will be totally exterminated or destroyed. "Annihilationism" stresses that the souls of those who live badly will be completely annihilated also when they are judged.

Some insist that for a God who has limitless love, eternal punishment is a contradiction. The punishment of judgment is discipline rather than a penalty, all will be led into good, and thus, finally everyone will be saved. There are some people who think that we experience hell not after death but during our earthly time. All these doctrines contradict the clear Bible doctrine regarding hell and The Judgment.

Calvinism teaches that some people were chosen to be cast into hell eternally. That is not what the Bible teaches. God never chooses anyone to be sent to hell. But He wants all the people to be saved. (Ezekiel 33:11, 1 Timothy 2:4)

How Japanese people think of hell.

Many people have an impression that hell is not so severe. In Japan there are various superstitions. There is a hot spring called "Jigoku; hell" in Beppu of Kyushu island in Japan. Usually people go to hot springs not to suffer but to refresh their minds and bodies, but it is strange to name a tourist resort "hell", isn't it? And there is a proverb that says "Jigoku ni mo Hotoke; Buddha is also in hell". It means that God's mercy is even present in hell. And there is a story about a man in hell, who could go up into heaven by climbing a spider's thread. These stories weaken the sufferings in hell.

I sometimes meet people saying "I don't mind if I go to hell." "Whatever you say, I will go to hell anyway." And also sometimes Christians tell me that "Although I tell unbelievers about hell and eternal death, they have no interest in it." Many Japanese think of hell lightly. They make light of eternal death and punishment. In some respects, I think they are a kind of victims. The assailants are religious groups and Christian denominations who teach false doctrines about hell. If they would have taught about the terror of hell as the Bible teaches us, unbelievers would never think of hell lightly. Instead they would want to ask "What should I do to be saved?"

The purpose to teach this doctrine.

The purpose why the Bible shows us the eternal punishment is of course for admonishment (Matthew 3:7-12) and also helps to realize the necessity of salvation, to seek the grace of Christ, and then to praise and give thanks to the Lord who has saved us from there by knowing the fear of God's anger. This doctrine also teaches how miserable the consequences of sin are and warns us of the danger of unfaithfulness and a false earthly sense of security. (Matthew 26:41; 1 Corinthians 10:12) However, this admonition is not only for unbelievers but is also for believers as long as they are sinful. (Matthew 26:24, 24:42-51, Hebrew 6:4-6) When you rescue a person who doesn't recognize that his house is on fire, even if you tell him the way to be saved, it would be useless for him unless you tell the critical situation he is in. Likewise, if a man has a false sense of security about his death and eternal life, we have to teach the Law to make him realize his sin,

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in order to tell him the only way he can be helped, which is the message of God's salvation. (Romans 3:20; 4:25; 5:13) We have to proclaim God's loving admonition so that he will despair of his state and turn to the Savior.

God's admonition about eternal sufferings again and again in the Bible comes from God's love toward all human beings. If someone by human reason judges God's admonishment as "cruel, unacceptable, or unrepeatable," that is truly misunderstanding God's love. The doctrine of eternal punishment is connected with God's divine judgment and emphasized for all sinners. (Romans 2:5,6; 3:4)

The doctrine of hell and eternal punishment never converts our souls, because "The Law brings wrath." (Romans 4:15) Nevertheless, the Law serves us as it is written, "Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith." (Galatians 3:24) Therefore, all the preachers who deny eternal punishment in hell are not loving preachers. Instead, they are the most cruel preachers among all false ones. We have to remember the words of the prophet, "When I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life, that same wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at your hand. Yet, if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered your soul." (Ezekiel 3:18-19) And please remember 1 Timothy 6:3-5, as well.

This type of teaching is truly "a teaching without love" "coming from cruel church." Jesus and His apostles clearly taught the Doctrine of eternal punishment. All Christians have to follow the Lord as faithful servants of Christ and as faithful administrators of God's mysteries. "Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful." (1 Corinthians 4:1,2)

How can we speculate about God's immeasurable righteousness and judgment with our shallow human thinking and a weak human sentiment? We should just follow the Bible which teaches us very clearly.

5. The Christian's attitude in anticipating standing before the judgment seat of Christ.

Many Bible passages about the Last Day sometimes make us feel insecure. "And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world." (1 John 2:18) "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching." (Hebrew 10:25,37) "You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand." (James 5:8) "But the end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers." (1 Peter 4:7)

And it is written that sufferings and trouble will increase all the more before the final day of judgment. (Matthew 24; 2 Peter 3; 2 Timothy 3:1) "Strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, 'We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.'" (Acts 14:22) So should we wait for the Lord's coming with anxiety and fearfulness?

We can stand before the Judgment without fear.

But thus far we have seen, we need never be afraid or despair on account of God's wrath which God's Law teaches us. We will be able to stand before the judgment because of Jesus Christ and His redemptive work. Jesus' sacred sacrifice was enough to atone for our sins perfectly. "By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." (Hebrews 10:10) "For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified." (Hebrews 10:14; Psalm 49:7-9,15) Not by our work or virtue but God Himself is our salvation! "Behold, God is my salvation, I will trust and not be afraid; The Lord, the Lord, is my strength and song; He also has become my salvation." (Isaiah 12:2)

God Himself declared us righteous through faith in Jesus. "Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." (Romans 3:22-24; 1:16,17; Genesis 15:6) Even if someone accuses us, the fact that God declared us righteous can never be overturned. Even Satan can't do it. "Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies." (Romans 8:33-34,38,39) "'Come now, and let us reason

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together,' says the Lord, 'Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool.'" (Isaiah 1:18) "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." (Revelation 7:14) God calls us "Holy ones"—ones who have no sin—over and over again. "But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God." (1 Corinthians 6:11; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13) God calls us "sons of God" many times. "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:26)

Even if someone says, "I am happy. My life is right, but you are not!" we do not have to be confused by these words. God tells us His children that we are His "Blessed ones!" many times in the Bible. "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin." (Romans 4:7,8; Matthew 5:1-12; Psalm 1; Luke 11:28)

God declares repeatedly, "Your sins have been wiped away". "As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us." (Psalm 103:12) "Who is a God like You, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in mercy. He will again have compassion on us and will subdue our iniquities. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea." (Micah 7:18,19) It is fact that God promised forgiveness of all our sins. "I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake; And I will not remember your sins." (Isaiah 43:25; Hebrew 8:12) "And at that time your people shall be delivered, every one who is found written in the book." (Daniel 12:1) And God revealed Himself as "The Lord". This name means "God of the Covenant", that is, our Lord is the only one who never changes, breaks, or forgets His promises to us. (1 Peter 1:25) All our sins have been completely forgiven through Jesus.

If you still have anxiety.

If you still have anxiety about standing before Christ on the Last Day, let us remember these verses, too. "For sin shall not

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have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not! Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness? But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness." (Romans 6:14-18) Sin never rules over us, because we are not under law but under grace! Our new spiritual lives as Christians do not come from the fear of punishment for breaking law, but from the motivation of thanksgiving for the grace which the Lord has given us.

The highest authority declares us righteous.

For Christians, the condemnation for our sins which we should have received has been changed into forgiveness of sins and righteousness through Jesus' work. By God's grace, Christians have received and now own the forgiveness of sins and righteousness which Jesus won for us. (Galatians 4:4,5; Romans 6:14,15) God's declaration of guiltlessness will never be overturned. (Romans 8:33-34) God will never investigate the sins of those who have been declared righteous, and He will never overturn His declaration on the spur of the moment. God is holy and true. (1 Timothy 2:13; Leviticus 19:2; Deuteronomy 32:4)

Even if a district court declares you as guiltless, but the Supreme Court declares you as guilty, which judgment will apply to you? Of course, the declaration of the Supreme Court has authority. In the same way, even if the people of the world or the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court judges you as a criminal, or even if you commit a sin which deserves the death penalty (Luke 22:33-43), if the real highest Justice, the Righteous God above all, declares you as guiltless, this judgment will be applied to you on the Last Day. (Romans 8:31-39) Just as neither Satan nor height nor depth nor any powers, nor money, nor anything else will be able to separate us from the love of God, these things also will never be able to overturn Christ's judgment.

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The Judge never sees our filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6), but He will see only our “garments of salvation, our robes of righteousness” which the Judge Himself won for us and offers to us and which we receive and wear through faith. (Revelation 7:9-17; Isaiah 61:10) The Judge Himself says, “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.” (John 5:24)

The Apostle John heard Jesus saying to him in Revelation, “Behold, I am coming as a thief. Blessed is he who watches, and keeps his garments, lest he walks naked and they see his shame.” (Revelation 16:15) What Jesus means is, “You need to make sure that you are always wearing perfect robes of righteousness.” We who wear the robes by faith in Jesus, do not need to be afraid of our rags covered with the stains of our sins when we stand before God on Judgment Day. We who have been given the spotless garments can call out with joy just as Isaiah wrote, “I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, He has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.” (Isaiah 61:10)

It is impossible to take us away from God’s grace. “And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand.” (John 10:28; 1 John 5:16) And the Lord will never forsake us. “All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out.” (John 6:37; Isaiah 49:15; Hebrew 13:5) And also we do not have to doubt the certainty of our salvation at all!

*But there is a possibility of losing this great blessing from God.
The only way to lose this blessing is if we leave our Lord.
(Hebrew 4:11; 10:4-6; Matthew 12:31,32; 1 Timothy 6:20)*

In fact, things which tempt us into unfaithfulness surround us and are dwelling among us. For this reason let us ponder the Bible message to learn how we can defeat our sinful nature, greed, temptation, and persecution from this world and Satan.

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How we can prepare for the Last day?

Christians nourish their faith by reading the Bible everyday and pondering it until the last day comes. We regularly gather for worship to encourage, to admonish, to strengthen each other and to make use of the means of grace. (Hebrew 10:25) Through these means of grace, the Holy Spirit continually supplies oil for our lamps of faith in Christ. The parable about the foolish virgins who didn't prepare for the coming groom is a good warning. They failed to use the means of grace. "Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, Lord, open to us!' But he answered and said, 'Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you.'" (Matthew 25:11,12)

Let us pray to God.

Praying to God is very important in preparing for the last day. Our old Adam continues to whisper to us to ignore prayer and helps make excuses like "I am so busy. I do not have enough time. I have something more important to do than praying to God. . . ." That is no excuse! We have to remember what Jesus says. "Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man." (Luke 21:36) Paul also says "Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving." (Colossians 4:2) Also Peter says, "But the end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers." (1 Peter 4:7) Let us pray and encourage one another so that we will not lose our faith in Jesus but stand firm until the last day. (1 Thessalonians 3:9-13)

Fighting against our sinful nature.

If we do not believe in God's promise or if we keep sinning in a false sense of security as the Christians in Rome and Thessalonica, we make ourselves "slaves of sin" again. They just were waiting for the last day without working, giving up on their responsibilities and doing nothing. Paul plainly rebuked them. (2 Thessalonians 3:10,12)

All human beings are either "slaves of sin" or "slaves of righteousness". (Matthew 12:20; 6:24) Don't forget that God redeemed us to be "Children of God", by Jesus' death and tri-

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umphant resurrection. We who belong to God receive God's inheritance. We can only receive it through Christ and by grace, and it is an absolutely certain blessing. Don't you think it is foolish to choose returning to sin, walking as a slave of sin, and going into eternal punishment, although you are under the glorious grace of God?

Peter's words lead us into a right preparation for Judgment Day. They warn us "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour." (1 Peter 5:8) Against God's will, Satan hopes that Christians will leave God and fall into eternal death. Satan, who is already judged, tries every possible means to take people to hell as much as he can until the Last Day. Satan will use distress, trial, wealth, power, and idolatry, like he used them when he tempted Jesus. (Matthew 4:1-11)

"But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly. For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth." (Luke 21:34,35)

Temptations of the world.

We Christians living in this world are always in danger that we might lose the great inheritance of heaven. Sin can easily infect us easier than influenza or a computer virus. It infects every part of the world, not only outside but also inside our homes and churches. It is carried through TV programs, TV commercials, magazines, customs, gossip, advertisements, music, classes in school, friends, and even loving family members. It is very dangerous to come into contact with sin everyday—sins such as robbery, swindling, suicide, murder, adultery, vulgarity, and other sins which fascinate us. Because we do not feel shock from these sins anymore, our conscience is easily paralyzed by them.

False teachings.

Satan knows the Bible very well and skillfully tempts us by false teachings. When the Bible tells about the Last Day, it warns us many times to "keep watch!" (Matthew 24:42; 25:13, Mark 13:35, 1 Thessalonians 5:8; Revelation 16:15) The Lord also warns us "Watch out that no one deceives you." As signs of the coming

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of the last day, the Bible says that various false teachings and false Christs will appear and deceive Christians. “O Timothy! Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane and idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge.” (1 Timothy 6:20)

Chiliasm (millennialism) insists, “Before or after the judgment, Jesus will come again in visible form and will raise Christians from the dead. He will reign on this earth for 1000 years, and He will destroy the temptation and suffering which come from Satan, who battles against God’s church.” But let us not put our hope in this earth. Jesus Himself says in John 18:36, “My kingdom is not of this world.” And also at the transfiguration (Luke 9:28-36) Peter offered to put up shelters on the mountain for Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. Peter wanted to keep the glory of the Lord on this earth, but Jesus didn’t answer him. (I think Moses and Elijah would never want to live on this earth anymore because they are receiving the blessings of heaven.) Let us not seek after earthly joy and happiness which is going to be destroyed and gives us only temporary peace. Rather let us keep our eyes of faith fixed on Jesus and seek after His kingdom, so that we will not fail to be declared guiltless on the Last Day. (Matthew 6:33; Colossians 3:1,2)

These are also works of Satan. Although Satan performs impressive signs and all kinds of counterfeit miracles, we can defeat them by God’s Word as Jesus did in the desert.

The most important thing is to remind and engrave in each one of our hearts the love of God’s Savior who accomplished our salvation by sacrificing His own life. “The blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleanses us from all sin.” (1 John 1:7)

How we can stand against these temptations of this world.

Christians can’t live apart from this world, but we can equip ourselves against Satan and the world. Christian education is indispensable for this. God offers us “the sword of the Spirit” and “the shield of faith” through Christian education. (Ephesians 6:16,17)

Let us ponder the verses Paul used to encourage the Christians in Thessalonica. “But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you. For you

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yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. For when they say, 'Peace and safety!' then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation." (1 Thessalonians 5:1-8)

Peter also emphasizes the same thought. "Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless; you therefore, beloved, since you know this beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen." (2 Peter 3:14,17,18)

Choose to use and listen to Law and Gospel.

The Law reminds us that we all have to stand before God's judgment. It tells us that we all have to attempt to explain all of our works and all of our sins. Whenever we hear the law, we recognize our sins and feel doubt, fear, and despair. The function of the law is to control our sinful flesh. When the law threatens us, saying that we have to explain our sins, we can control ourselves to some extent through this function of the law.

The Gospel never has threat and demands. God's Gospel relieves those who are afraid of the law like this. "I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake; And I will not remember your sins." (Isaiah 43:25) The Gospel freely offers us Christ, the forgiveness of our sins, and salvation and comforts us, relieves us, and leads us through faith in Christ.

Since we Christians still have a sinful old Adam, we have to listen to both the Law and the Gospel of God. Our sinful nature must be shattered through the awareness of our sins and fear when we hear the frightening event of Judgment Day. Then we

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have to rely on the refuge of the Gospel, which tells us that all our sins have been forgiven through Jesus. We can properly prepare for Judgment Day through this correct division and use of Law and Gospel.

Walk as a slave of righteousness.

The passing of time shows that we are getting closer to the Last Day or the end of the time of grace. Even though it is certain that we will be declared “guiltless” on the last day and we will go to heaven, we can’t have misplaced confidence. Shall we continue sinning because we will certainly be saved? That is not the attitude of a Christian who has been completely freed from service to sin. It is rather the attitude of an unbeliever who doesn’t have gratitude and love toward to the Savior in his heart. “You also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. For you are not under law but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not!” (Romans 6:11-12,14,15) Instead “But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. For just as you presented your members as slaves of uncleanness, and of lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness.” (Romans 6:17-19) Although we are still “slaves”, we have become slaves of righteousness, and want to serve the Lord with joy and love by using our talents and time.

To sum up, good preparation for the Last Day means also fulfilling our responsibilities faithfully during our time of grace because we are called by the Lord. Namely, it means that we should glorify God with all our deeds and serve God and our neighbor with gratitude, love, and joy by correctly hearing and teaching the good news of Jesus. “Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31; Colossians 3:12-17; 1 Peter 2:9, and Matthew 25 about the Parable of the Talents).

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Sowing the seed of the Gospel is right preparation.

We all are disciples of Jesus Christ and we all have our own special missions in our Christian lives. (1 Peter 2:9) We all are witnesses for the Lord. It doesn't matter whether you are a pastor, a teacher, an elder, or a lay member. It is a natural action to share our joy of the Gospel which fills our hearts, just like a living tree bears fruit. "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." (Matthew 12:34) "I believed; therefore I have spoken." (2 Corinthians 4:13)

Persecution can not stop our mission work. We can see this through the works of the Prophets in the OT and the Apostles in the NT. "And they called them and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered and said to them, 'Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.'" (Acts 4:18-20) Rather, God allowed persecutions as a tool to assist in mission work. "Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word." (Acts 8:4)

Don't we want to take advantage of the many opportunities which the Lord has provided, since we have the same joy of the Gospel as the disciples had? It is said that the population of the world is two-thirds Christian, but this number means "visible church members", namely those who are nominally members. True Christians who belong to the "invisible church" are fewer. (In Japan it is said that the visible Christian church is one-hundredth of the population.) It is a fact that we who belong to the CELC are less than one-hundredth of the world's population, but the vast mission field in front of us makes us joyful rather than disappointed to use these opportunities for sowing the Gospel. The Lord told us to "Sow the Gospel." But this is not a burden or a labor or a difficult task for us who love the Lord. (1 John 5:3; John 14:23,24)

After Jesus ascended into heaven, two angels appeared and rebuked the disciples. "Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven?" (Acts 1:11) It is very clear what the angels were saying. "Go to work! You have work to do!" "Prepare correctly for Jesus' second coming." Or "Seek first the kingdom of

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God and His righteousness.” It does not mean “to be a man who always gazes up into heaven” but it means to work hard as a faithful servant. It means not only to protect ourselves from the temptations of Satan and keep ourselves pure, but also to be eager to follow the Lord’s command, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.” (Mark 16:15)

We have received great blessings through God’s grace. We have the Gospel which is God’s pure Word, the power of God, the Truth, and explains eternal salvation. We have to preserve this great blessing. There is no other Gospel. There is no other way of salvation. (Galatians 1:7-9; Romans 1:16,17; 1 Timothy 4:2-5) We servants of the Lord have to use this blessing as our Lord wants us to. Paul confessed that he did everything “for the gospel’s sake”. (1 Corinthians 9:23)

Let us Christians shine the light of hope from our Savior into this world of darkness without hiding it. (Matthew 5:14-16) “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” (John 3:16) This Gospel is our motivation for evangelism, worship, preaching, and living.

The blessing of the unity of faith and knowledge.

We have received another great blessing through God’s grace. It is “the blessing of the unity of faith and knowledge.” Although we have different nationalities, languages, customs, and places to work, we share the unity of faith in Him and in the knowledge of our Savior and in the same judgment our Lord has given to us. “Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.” (1 Corinthians 1:10, Ephesians 4:3-6,13) God’s same will is proclaimed, and the same judgment and knowledge are preserved in our churches, seminaries, Sunday schools, Bible classes, and mission work. This unity is never made by human work and wisdom (1 Corinthians 2:14), but only by the Holy Spirit. Let us thank God for this unity. Also, let us pray to God that this unity will spread out and be strengthened.

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You and I are the nation of God. We are brothers and sisters in our Lord. We possess the Gospel that is the truth. We possess true, perfect, and eternal freedom from Satan, and from the punishment of sin and death by God's grace through Jesus' perfect life and His substitutionary death. (Hebrews 2:14,15)

The Bible has been keeping Christians prepared since early Christian times by warnings (Law) concerning the Last Day. And the Bible has been continually encouraging Christians to joyfully await the second coming of the Lord and the Resurrection. "Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing." (1 Timothy 4:8)

"So Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him, He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation." (Hebrew 9:28; Romans 13:11; 1 Corinthians 1:7; 7:29; Titus 2:12,13) Through these words, God blesses us so that we do not become lazy and become separated from God's grace in this difficult age. We can live our life faithfully to God and look forward to His coming.

Finally, let us ponder the following passages: "Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love." (1 John 4:17,18) God's love has been poured out on us already. We should not live relying on our own love, but let us live by God's love, showing love to God and our neighbor until the Last Day. God is love. Let us remember this very short word of God, especially when we are in temptation, persecution, and distress.

Even if we are in an undesirable situation such as distress or persecution, God works everything for our good with His love! What a comfort for us! The love which God treats us with is much greater than any other love. (John 15:13; Isaiah 49:15) In these passages, God urges us to be dominated by God's love. No one wants a life full of fear. Therefore, keep reading the Bible and to be continually blessed with God's love.

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God declares us to be His children who will receive eternal life in heaven. So we do not need to be afraid at all! God doesn't want us to spend our life in the vain fear of sin, death, judgment, and doubt. "There is no fear in love." God's love has shut fear away from us, because the source of our fear has been wiped out by the love of God.

Let us joyfully and peacefully proclaim the last word of the Bible. "He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming quickly.' Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus! The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen." (Revelation 22:20,21)



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Essay #5:

Waiting for Heaven with Joy

Written by Rev. Ezequiel Sánchez, Mexico
Presented by Rev. Mario Domínguez, Mexico
Translated into English by Pastor Michael Hartman

I. Heaven, Our Future Home

*Oh, heavenly Jerusalem! Oh, when will I see you?
Your glory which the righteous see, when will I rejoice?
Beloved heavenly homeland, Stranger to pain,
Those who suffer hard sadness, your love will comfort them.*

*Without shadows I will meditate:
There is life and light in you;
The star will shine eternally there.
The King of Glory, My Jesus, I will see you reigning there;
My soul will be filled with never-ending light in that Zion.¹*

As I began this paper, I found myself very nervous, wondering how I would share with you everything concerning heaven. While I was wondering where to begin, my eldest daughter came up to me and asked me, “Daddy, what are you working on?” I replied “I am writing about what the Scriptures tell us about heaven,” and I asked her, “What does heaven mean to you?” She told me, very simply, “It means to go to my home.”

My esteemed brothers, what great joy I felt that an eleven-year-old child might say it so simply. All those who are here know very well that we are going to heaven. We have learned this since we were very young. But, all the same, there is a lot of misinformation out there concerning heaven. This bad information comes from many of today’s religious leaders. Some say that it does not exist. Others tell us that heaven is found right here. And still others even give the impression that we cannot get there. Therefore, we have the singular responsibility to

¹These two stanzas are translated from the Spanish hymn “¡Oh, célica Jerusalén!” which is found in *Culto Cristiano*, Editorial El Escudo, New York, 1978. (Hymn #342) The hymn is sung to the melody of “America the Beautiful.”

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obtain our information solely from the Scriptures. They show us with sufficient clarity what we can expect. Our confidence is strengthened when we draw out from Scripture words that tell us everything we need to know, even when the answers which are given do not follow human logic. The fact is that natural man comes up with a limitless amount of explanations for heaven. Some, including weak believers, consider heaven to be a place which is so holy that it is impossible to live there because they are sinful. As ministers of the Lord we have many opportunities to share this message of heaven: opportunities to share it with those who feel alone, with those who are sad, with those who live certain of heaven, etc. As believers we rejoice in the promise of heaven. We know that our life will not end here. We rejoice because right now we enjoy knowing God, who has given us life by rescuing us for a new life that we do not deserve. We rejoice in praising Him, in giving our treasures, our time and our talents to Him. We enjoy Him right now. But without a doubt, in heaven our joy will be even greater. It is a joy that the Enemy cannot stop, since he has been defeated. It is a joy that death cannot triumph over, since Christ triumphed over death. And it is a joy which the world cannot give. It is blessing in its most complete form. We wait even though it seems tiring. Nevertheless, we are not abandoned while we wait. We have the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, who enables us to focus right now on the marvels which God has done in the past. The Holy Spirit enables us not to forget that Christ came to save a world fallen in sin. Our wait is joyful simply because we will see our God face to face and always be by His side.

We believe that God will grant eternal life to us and to all those who believe in Christ. The person who does not believe this simply does not believe the Gospel. Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life."² With these words of Jesus, he emphasized that He is the only way to heaven. We could not go there directly if it were not by means of Him. Eternal life is a certainty which we have by believing in Him. "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have

²John 6:47. Unless otherwise noted, all the verses have been taken from the NIV. (In Spanish they originally came from the Reina Valera 1960.)

eternal life.”³ Without a doubt, the story of the serpent which was lifted up in the desert served to teach Nicodemus about the doctrine of Heaven. Jesus shared this story with him in order to explain that he also needed to be lifted up, but lifted up on a cross. We recall that everyone who looked at the serpent was healed from his bite. In the same way, everyone who might look at Jesus with faith will be saved from eternal death and has life. This is a universal promise. It does not exclude anyone. Rather, it belongs to each and every person who believes. It is very simple and personal. Nicodemus, upon hearing the promise, knew that the hope of Heaven was offered to him. “My sheep listen to my voice . . . [and] I give them eternal life.”⁴ The relationship with Christ will be an eternal relationship. This is due to the intimate and personal relationship which exists between Jesus and His followers, as well as the fact that He is the Christ, the Son of God. We, the believers, will never be lacking words of comfort. With Jesus Christ we are always sure. This is reality for believers. Thanks to the fact that Christ has shared with us the truth that by believing in His work of redemption, we can think that Heaven is where we will dwell.

When we meditate on the term “heaven” we realize that Scripture uses this term in various ways. Heaven is where the birds fly. Heaven is where the celestial bodies can be found. And heaven is God’s dwelling place. It is this last usage that we want to focus on at this moment. The fact is that heaven is one of the sweetest terms in our vocabulary because it is the term that God uses to speak of the home of all who will receive eternal life. Many questions enter our heart. Further along we will speak of these matters, but I share with you the certainty that enough has been revealed to us by our Lord in order to give us the certainty that it is a place of eternal blessings. But this blessing is so great that, just as I wrote, our human minds are incapable of understanding it completely.

Earlier I wrote, Scripture also uses the term heaven to speak of the place where the birds fly. “God said, ‘Let the water teem with living creatures, and let the birds fly above the earth,

³John 3:14,15

⁴John 10:27,28

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across the expanse of [heaven].”⁵ But, at the same time, the term is used to refer to the place where God put the sun, the moon and the stars.

God said, “Let there be lights in the expanse of [heaven] to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark seasons and days and years, and let them be lights in the expanse of the [heaven] to give light on the earth.” And it was so. God made two great lights—the greater to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars.⁶

We will not spend much time on this point as we all agree in what the Scriptures say—the firmament that is over us is also known as *heaven*.

Scripture helps us maintain a good concept as to what heaven is. Despite the different uses of the term, and the fact that Scripture describes heaven with various names, our dogmaticians have explained it clearly. Saint Paul, in the second letter to the Corinthians, tells us, “I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven.”⁷ What is Paul referring to in this text when he says, “third heaven”? Professor David Valleskey says, “Paul is possibly using terminology used by the Jews of his day . . .”⁸ It does not surprise us that Paul refers to paradise as the third heaven. This man was taken to the presence of God, to paradise, where everything is beautiful and perfect just as it was in the garden of Eden. It is interesting that Jesus also uses the term paradise to describe heaven. These were the words which he used when he spoke to the thief next to him on the cross: “Today you will be with me in paradise.”⁹ Another illustration can be found in Scripture which describes what it is like to be eternally in the presence of God. Paradise is described in Rev-

⁵Genesis 1:20. As with the Hebrew word שָׁמַיִם, Spanish does not have separate words for sky and heaven, rather it solely uses the word “cielos” to refer to both.

⁶Genesis 1:14-16

⁷2 Corinthians 12:2

⁸David J. Valleskey. *2 Corinthians* People’s Bible. Northwestern Publishing House, Milwaukee, 1998. (p. 222)

⁹Luke 23:43

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elation with these words: “To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”¹⁰ Jesus wants all to be a part of the victorious celebration around the tree of life, which is in paradise. This word, paradise or garden, reminds us of the garden of Eden. We see that he who overcomes will have access to the tree of life.¹¹

In the Gospel of St. John, Jesus refers to this *place* as “My Father’s house” which has many rooms.¹² Here He puts forth the idea of home, rest, and communion. By nature, human beings do not have a place in the house of God because sin closed the pathway. Jesus’ death was the payment for sins and the mansion was prepared by means of his resurrection. This was the sign that everything is now ready. There is a place with the Father which awaits all disciples by means of His Word. Jesus comes to invite us to enter. In his second coming, he will return to welcome us to our home. Disciples know the way. Jesus has shown the way and he has demonstrated that, indeed, there is a specific place where we will be.

The book of Hebrews speaks of a “heavenly country” as the place which we are headed to. In the same way, in ancient times, Israel was directed to the land of Canaan; the promised land.

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.¹³

The author correctly concludes that they were looking for a homeland. A homeland that was promised to them by the Sav-

¹⁰Revelation 2:7

¹¹Revelation 22:14

¹²John 14:2

¹³Hebrews 11:13-16

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ior. Heaven is the true home for believers because it is there where God lives with His angels. Scripture describes Moses speaking of the place where God lives. “Look down from heaven, your holy dwelling place, and bless your people Israel.”¹⁴ There are many other references in Scripture which tell us that heaven is God’s residence; a *place*, though a spiritual one, far from our dimensional perspective, not found in our line of sight or logic.

Nevertheless, we clearly understand that our triune God is not limited by heaven. As Solomon writes, “The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you.”¹⁵ Rahab also confesses, “The LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below.”¹⁶ Scripture clearly recognizes that our triune God is present in every place. That way we can say that God is found in heaven, because to be by His side is to be under His blessing.

It is very common among modern theologians to question if the eternal blessings of the redeemed will include only a state of existence or conscience. There is no doubt that modern theologians speak more of heaven as a present spiritual state, which is a position far from that of Scripture. But, it is true that when the Bible speaks of the state of the believer and the place, those are far above the time and space that our human mind can imagine. When we focus on the inspired Word of God rather than on our own imagination and human logic, it becomes very evident that heaven is a place. There are a few references which ratify this truth, and they are solid. Scripture is very clear on the fact that God created heaven. “Sovereign Lord . . . you made the heaven.”¹⁷ Heaven belongs to God. “The highest heavens belong to the LORD.”¹⁸ It is a place where God dwells and so Jesus invited us to pray, “Our Father in heaven.”¹⁹ Peter confirms that heaven is a real place where God carefully guards the

¹⁴Deuteronomy 26:15

¹⁵1 Kings 8:27

¹⁶Joshua 2:11

¹⁷Acts 4:24

¹⁸Psalms 115:16

¹⁹Matthew 6:9

inheritance which has been prepared for the sons of God; “kept in heaven for you.”²⁰

II. We Will Enjoy our Eternal Stay

Our greatest joy concerning heaven is that our Triune God, in His entire splendor, will be there. Just as Job trusted that he would see God, we too will see Him. In Job 19:26 we hear his words: “and after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God.” Our Savior promised in Matthew 5:8 that the pure in heart will see God. It is marvelous that we, as redeemed persons, will be there, as eternal trophies of God’s wonderful grace. Believers of all ages, cleansed by the blood of the Lamb, will be wearing white robes of salvation. We will be there with glorified bodies, just like the glorified body of our Resurrected Savior. Yes, it is true; God has prepared glorified bodies for us, when the mortal one will be absorbed by our earthly life.

Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.²¹

We will fully enjoy the holiness given to us. Never again will we sadden Christ’s heart with our tendencies to sin. There will be no boasting, and none of us will say that he arrived at heaven’s gate by his own merits. There will be no envy, nor criticism, nor gossiping. Never again will we be afflicted. All of the manifestations of the flesh will give place to the fruit of the Spirit. The Lord will present us “without fault and with great joy.”²²

²⁰1 Peter 1:4

²¹2 Corinthians 5:1-5

²²Jude 24

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All sadness and sighs, tears and weeping will no longer be known. The anguish over losing a loved one will not occur again. Life will be free of tension, confusion, and agitation. All anxieties and emotional problems will remain forever in the past. We will not suffer from sickness, as our glorified bodies will not allow it. "There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."²³ The redeemed followers in heaven will not hunger or thirst, "for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water."²⁴ This promise produces joy and special anticipation for those that have suffered in this life. At the right hand of God we will enjoy what we could not find here in this world. As David writes in Psalm 16:11, "You will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand." Death will no longer exist.

In the book of Revelation we read that in heaven the saints will be prostrated, worshipping. There will be true and perfect adoration. It will not be imperfect on our part, and our mind will not wander during worship. In heaven we will be worshipping in front of the blessed Triune God, and throughout all eternity our heart will pound with spiritual joy from living in the light of the glory of God.

In heaven we will be in the Lord's presence, and God "himself will be with them and be their God."²⁵ The presence of the Lord will characterize heaven, just as He is and will be. "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face."²⁶ Now we see and understand very little, and the reason for this is that God has revealed to us only some details about life in the eternal kingdom of God. It is as if the curtain was opened only a little in order to give us a slight glimmer of that life. John wrote that the redeemed will see his face.²⁷ As I said awhile back, we will enjoy heaven because it will also be a rest from our work.

²³Revelation 21:4

²⁴Revelation 7:17

²⁵Revelation 21:3

²⁶1 Corinthians 13:12

²⁷Revelation 22:14

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Then I heard a voice from heaven say, "Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on." "Yes," says the Spirit, "they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them."²⁸

Many Christians have used these words in preparation for death and so dissipated all fear of it. Those who die with saving faith know where they are going the very moment they leave this valley of tears. They will then rest from their work.

We will be eternally worshipping the Lord, but let us not understand this incorrectly. We will not be lazy. "No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him."²⁹ We know that we will serve the Lord. He will utilize us for all eternity. We should not find it strange that today some of us might think that serving God on this earth is like being in heaven, but complete service will be found in heaven because that is where perfect holiness will be. What a marvelous combination! Service and worship. "After this I heard what sounded like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting: 'Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God.'"³⁰

So now we have very pleasing news. We know that those redeemed by God will receive the kingdom "prepared for you since the creation of the world."³¹ It is also indicated that the apostle Paul hoped to receive the crown of righteousness. Revelation paints a picture of the inhabitants of heaven throwing down their crowns before the throne of God.³² "Love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked."³³ Jesus promises a reward to those who act in this way. He used the same word in 6:23, "reward in heaven." This mention of a reward in no way implies that

²⁸Revelation 14:13

²⁹Revelation 22:3

³⁰Revelation 12:1

³¹Matthew 25:34

³²Revelation 4:10

³³Luke 6:35

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we are saved by our good works, nor because of our love. Rather, the reward that Jesus promises is free and given mercifully in order to comfort His disciples. It will be a heavenly reward. 1 Corinthians 3:8,14,15 teaches:

The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor . . . If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.

This text appears to teach us the existence of degrees of celestial rewards, also known as levels of glory. On the other hand, it is certain that when the New Testament speaks of the inheritance of believers, that the blessing received in heaven will be equal for all. That blessing will be a peaceful happiness. Paul also says, "Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously."³⁴ There are no secrets concerning the principles that the Judge will follow when he issues out rewards. He has been completely open with us so that we might know beforehand how we can run to win. Without a doubt, we are encouraged when we consider the following thoughts. Faithfulness will be rewarded, not success.

His master replied, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!"³⁵

Paul says, "Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful."³⁶ We cannot always be successful, but we can attempt to maintain ourselves as faithful. It is not how great a gift we have or how much ability we possess. Rather, what is important is how we employ them.

To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. The man who had

³⁴2 Corinthians 9:6

³⁵Matthew 25:21,23

³⁶1 Corinthians 4:2

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents."³⁷

³⁷Matthew 25:15-28

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We have not all received the same abilities, but certainly the Lord emits his judgment according to how each one has used what He has given them. It is not so much the class of service rendered, rather the spirit with which it was done.

Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.³⁸

We do all things thinking that they are for the Lord, and not for men. We enjoy remembering that He does not like a spirit which attempts to barter with the Lord, asking, "What's my part?"³⁹ I believe that desire will be rewarded even when the results we might wish for have not been realized. "The Lord said to my father David, 'Because it was in your heart to build a temple for my Name, you did well to have this in your heart.'⁴⁰ "For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have."⁴¹ David was not permitted to build the temple, but God congratulated him for having the desire in his heart. It is not the amount that is worth something, rather the attitude of the heart. "And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward."⁴² The widow who only threw two coins in the offering is a constant reminder of this.⁴³ We would say that it is not how we might evaluate each other's service, but rather how the Lord evaluates it.

The righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and

³⁸Colossians 3:22-24

³⁹Matthew 19:27-30

⁴⁰1 Kings 8:18

⁴¹2 Corinthians 8:12

⁴²Matthew 10:42

⁴³Luke 21:2

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invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?" The King will reply, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."⁴⁴

It is not what the rest see, but what God sees and knows.⁴⁵ If we do something to receive public approval, and it is publicly approved, we have already received our reward—only a public one.

So, we can say that there will be degrees of glory in heaven, but we cannot, in every sense, describe what they will consist of. What we can be sure of is that all the redeemed will rejoice in a perfect state of happiness. In this eternal happiness, which we describe as blessings, there will not be differences between one over the other, because eternal happiness is seeing God and we will see Him. In summary, the degrees of glory will be given as a prize, but not as something deserved. They will be based on His grace which he shows to all those who in their earthly lives demonstrated their faith in service dedicated to the Lord.⁴⁶ I should point out that this difference in glory will not produce envy, as that is a sin⁴⁷ and sin will be completely abolished in the future life of the redeemed.⁴⁸

To be precise we would say that we know a few facts about heaven. The earthly conditions will not exist. "Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind."⁴⁹ We know that there will be no marriage. "At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven."⁵⁰ We know that we will be one flock. There will be no divisions. "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and

⁴⁴Matthew 25:37-40

⁴⁵Matthew 6:1-18

⁴⁶Luke 19:12-19

⁴⁷Galatians 5:20

⁴⁸Psalms 17:15; 16:11

⁴⁹Isaiah 65:17

⁵⁰Matthew 22:30

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there shall be one flock and one shepherd.”⁵¹ We know that there will be no war between governments, or any earthly vocations, nor denominational divides. There will not be a division of languages. Those from all nations and languages will be united. “After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.”⁵² There will be no sickness, pain, poverty, sadness, or death. “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”⁵³

III. Maintaining our Eyes on Heaven

By means of the sacrament of Holy Baptism we have received the seal, the guarantee which is the Holy Spirit. He has given us faith and certainty in the Gospel that says that we are His adopted sons and heirs destined to receive all His glorious riches. Without a doubt, our baptism was when we began looking towards heaven; and we continue to be strengthened with the words of the Gospel which offers us food for our soul. Yes, it is true, we enjoy feeding the hope which we have, and one place where this happens is every time we participate in the Lord’s Supper. God does his work and fortifies our redeemed lives. God shares His peace through the means of grace, and this peace is yours by means of Christ Jesus. Though your conscience accuses you along the pathway to heaven. Though the world points out your many failures. Though Satan tries to infuse fear into your soul, causing you to remember your many sins, in order to erase your vision of heaven and the forgiveness you have received from Christ. Though these things happen, you can know that you have indeed been completely reconciled to Him. Jesus has announced this to you. And He is the foundation; the capstone on which your soul rests while it awaits the eternal mansion and complete blessing. It is in Christ that we have learned to deposit the entire weight of our trials,

⁵¹John 10:16

⁵²Revelation 7:9

⁵³Revelation 21:4; Isaiah 25:8

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trusting that He will take over responsibility for them. We have commended into His hands our yesterday and our today, knowing that He maintains us in His grace. And while we wait for tomorrow, we commend our souls to His mercy.

This side of heaven can be very beautiful; but heaven will be more. All that which surrounds us puts pressure on us, but we are confident because of God's promises. The night He was betrayed, there in the shadow of death, Jesus promised them heaven. These words are also for us. There is something beyond our grave. It is heaven. We are determined to maintain our hope of heaven with its great glory and splendor. Knowing that eternity exists is our great comfort and strength and joy. It is there. A home in which friendship with the Father prevails. We can be sure that there is space for us because He, who poured on us all of his mercy, has promised to reserve us a place. This hope feeds us, His disciples, making the means of grace our sole help on this side of heaven. These means of grace, which are filled with His powerful promises, assure us that we will inhabit heaven. They make heaven become visible to us. Alongside Paul we can say, "I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day."⁵⁴ We can be certain that Christ has the power to fulfill His promises. "If it was not so, I would have told you," says the Lord. It was by means of his resurrection that he triumphed and now his victory is also ours. Because of Him, we will rise and the first thing that we will see will be our God, ready to share eternity with us. We will live in heaven solely because God has freely extended his goodwill and grace to us. Without a doubt, we could also say alongside Paul, "I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far."⁵⁵ And he also said, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain."⁵⁶ Those who are present right now at this meeting will not have the opportunity to see each other again, but if we remain in His Word, heaven is the place where we will run into each other again.

⁵⁴2 Timothy 1:12

⁵⁵Philippians 1:23

⁵⁶Philippians 1:21

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We look to the end with anticipation and joy. For us it is liberation. For us it is the beginning of all good things. May God help us continue to look forward with anticipation. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has saved us from all our sins and has opened the eternal doors to the celestial city, be with all of us. Amen.



Mario Dominguez of Mexico