

Life in the Kingdom

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The Kingdom of God Series

Revelation 21-22:1-5

How many of you know what rope jumping is? Rope jumping is different than bungee cord jumping in that bungee cords have elasticity to the cord, and the person jumping goes up and down like a yo-yo. But with rope jumping there is more of a challenge because the rope is taut and your body gets an enormous jerk when the rope stops.

One of the pioneers of rope jumping is a fellow by the name of Dan Osman, who devised a way of jumping where you put the rope's anchor far to the left or far to the right of your launch spot so when you jump the rope swings out like a gigantic pendulum. And instead of plunging straight down and getting jerked, you become a human pendulum with this incredible horizontal swing. Anyway, Dan Osman practiced his rope jumping techniques by jumping 1,050 feet (that is like a hundred story building) from a cliff in Yosemite National Park. Having done 1,050 feet, he said, "I want to go to the very end of the rope – 1100 feet – right to the floor of Yosemite Canyon.

Now, Dan Osman is friends with a bunch of guys who are totally into extreme sports. One of his friends runs a bungee jumping company. Another friend owns a skydiving company. His third friend is what is called a BASE jumper. I don't know if you have heard of BASE-jumping, but it stands for Building Antennae Span Earth Jumping. Basically, any super high place can serve as a platform from which you parachute. So you will see these guys climbing up these huge antennae towers on top of cliffs. The police are scrambling after them trying to pull them down, and they run out on the end of these antennae arms and leap off into the valley with their parachutes.

But Dan Osman, he was just the most far out of the extreme sports guys. His friends who do the BASE jumping said that they had gathered near this place where bungee cord jumpers were jumping from a bridge down into a 700 foot gorge. They said, "All of a sudden this guy next to us is doing this rope jumping." His friend said, "Dan changed my life. Watching him rope jump, he opened my eyes to things I have never experienced before."

So one night last November, a bunch of the guys went to the top of this cliff in Yosemite National Park. Dan Osman was trying his 1100' rope-jumping leap down into the gorge. Here is a guy who has been featured on commercials – these crazy Reebok or Casio watch commercials where guys are hurdling out of a plane or jumping into a waterfall. One of those crazy guys is Dan Osman. Well, anyway, one evening last November, he does his rope jump. In order to

see, his friends turned on their car lights. It makes it even more difficult to do it at night because you can't see the valley floor below.

Dan Osman leaped and his friend listened for the tell-tale whip of the rope. He was waiting and waiting. And then the rope made that fssssssshewww sound cutting through the air. And then his friend heard this horrible scream. Aaaggghhhh...it sounded like tree branches and then sounded like a break – like a massive tree breaking in half. It echoed across the valley. His friend started to freak. He had to make his way slowly down the cliff. And there he found his friend, Dan Osman. He had been killed.

None of his friends asked why he did this. They said they all understood why. For 11 seconds Dan Osman would be radically, totally alive.

Why do people do these crazy things? There are guys now bungee cord jumping into volcanoes. There is a company that set up so that novices can bungee cord jump into just above Victoria Falls off of a bridge. Companies are having to build higher and higher and faster and faster roller coasters to provide a more intense thrill.

You may have read a few months ago about the professional wrestler who fell 90 feet from the ceiling of Kemper Arena in Kansas City. They were going to lower this guy down from the ceiling of the arena and something happened. As he was being lowered on the cable, either he was not attached properly or he thought he was attached and wasn't. But he just dropped 90 feet like a stone. He hit his head and died in front of 16,000 fans.

What is going on with the rope jumpers, the people who are leaping into volcanoes, the Worldwide Wrestling Federation that has to continue to push the envelope? There is now a thing called extreme wrestling. They are trying to get it licensed. People hit one another literally with bats covered with barbed wire.

A fellow by the name of Barry Vacker, who is a professor at Southern Methodist University said that all of these things are part of a growing cultural trend called "Edge-ism," where people find their identity and find life by continually pushing the edges, breaking cultural norms.

You see the same thing in some of the radical body piercing and tattooing. Have you seen this fellow who is turning himself into a human reptile? He has not only tattooed a good part of his body green, but he has put implants under his skin so that his body will feel like scales. He has had his tongue surgically cut so that it would be forked like a reptile's. And he has had implants into his temples to make it look like horns. He said his goal is to become a human reptile.

There is another fellow who has turned his whole body into a giant jigsaw puzzle or at least the outlines of a jigsaw puzzle. He said that whenever he is

depressed, he just has one of the jigsaw pieces colored in in blue. Eventually, from the top of his head to the soles of his feet, he wants to turn his whole body blue. I don't know what he will do then when he is depressed and when there are no more puzzle pieces to fill in.

What is going on with the edge-ism, continually having to push the edge in entertainment, in thrill seeking, in the ways people express their sexuality, or in the way people dress? I think Dan Osman's friends had it exactly right when they said, "Dan was seeking for 11 seconds to be totally, awesomely, alive."

See, here is my theory – I think thrill seeking and extreme behavior is just life-seeking under a different name. I think people need more and more thrills and engage in more extreme behaviors the more meaningless life becomes. The more dead I feel inside, the more nothing matters. Politicians can say or do anything and it doesn't matter. You just reverse fields the next day and everyone goes, "Oh...yawn...so what if he just contradicted himself. It is all part of a show anyway." Life has just become a virtual reality entertainment show. A pro basketball player decides that he is going to wear a white wedding dress down the street and we all just shrug. What difference does it make?

People engage in more and more extreme behaviors because they are seeking life in a world in which everything is so meaningless and nothing matters. How many folks believe that their choices really matter? That it really makes a difference whether you choose to read the Bible or read a romance novel or "People" magazine. Or that it makes a difference what you watch or what you eat or what you do?

I think Christians are even infected by a feeling that life is meaningless and that their choices don't matter. I think that is the reason why we see so much bad Christian behavior. It is because there is an overall sense of despair. What difference does it make? For some Christians, hey, it's all just going to burn up in the end anyway. For some Christians the earth is just going to be completely burned up. History is going to completely end. The world is going to be evaporated, but my soul will go to heaven. So what difference does it make what I do right now with my body or with the planet, or in my relationships?

And then we hear Jesus' message: "The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the good news."

Now, once we understand and begin to embrace the message of the kingdom of God, it lifts this fog of meaninglessness off our lives and this sense that nothing that we do ultimately matters. Our lives don't matter, our bodies don't matter, our choices don't matter, and this world doesn't matter. Once we embrace the message of the kingdom, we discover in that message the real life that the rope jumpers and the body piercers and volcano leapers are searching for. It is not

just 11 seconds of life, but a continual sense of life that is found as we touch the kingdom of God.

I have called today's talk, "Life in the Kingdom." Let's pray.

Revelation 21-22:1-5

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 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."

He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

He said to me, "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son. 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."

One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west. The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

The angel who talked with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city, its gates and its walls. The city was laid out like a square, as long as it was wide. He measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long. He measured its wall and it was 144 cubits thick, by man's measurement, which the angel was using. The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third chalcedony, the fourth emerald, the fifth sardonyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth

amethyst. The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of pure gold, like transparent glass.

I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. 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. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

Last week I began a series on The Kingdom of God. And I said to you that this was the central message of Jesus. He came to preach, and he came to demonstrate the message that the kingdom of God was at hand.

Now most Christians who read the Bible haven't a clue regarding what Jesus could have meant when he said that the kingdom of God was at hand. Repent and believe the good news. I believe most churchgoers don't know what they are praying when they pray the Lord's Prayer each week at church with that little line that reads, "Thy kingdom come; thy will be done." How would you know that God was answering your prayer? What would it look like for God's kingdom to come? And his will to be done on earth as it is in heaven?

Last week I suggested that the audience who listened to Jesus, those Jewish hearers in the first century, did not scratch their heads and say to themselves, "I don't know what Jesus is talking about when he uses this phrase, 'the kingdom of God.'" The Jewish hearers had a 2000-year story line that Jesus' words fit into, a story that went back to the time of their forefather Abraham.

And when the Jewish hearers heard Jesus say that the kingdom of God was at hand, they heard three things. They heard Jesus say that God is coming to visit his people, and so the enemies of God's people are going to be defeated. And because God is coming to visit his people, a reign of prosperity and blessing is coming, and God will be forming for himself a people who live a distinctive lifestyle wholly for the Lord.

Now, I think there are two ways for us to get a handle on Jesus' message regarding the kingdom. We can look backward as we did last week, backward to the Old Testament and what Jesus' Jewish hearers would have heard when they heard Jesus preach, "The kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe." We can look to the past, in other words.

Another way for us to get a handle on the meaning of "the kingdom of God is at hand" is to look forward, to look to the future. What will the kingdom of God look like in the future when it is fully manifested and fully realized? We can look back in the past and see pictures and illustrations and images of the kingdom, or we can look forward into the future following the second coming of Christ when we see the kingdom of God manifested in all of its fullness.

So what I want to do today is look forward to the future. If you have a Bible, open with me to Revelation 21. Here is what we read:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 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."

What is the future of the planet going to be like? During different periods of history, people have apprehended the future in different ways. In the 1800s the general view of the future was very optimistic. The 1800s was a century of progress, and people anticipated unending expansion and development. It was an age of conquering new frontiers not only in exploration and settlement as Americans moved westward, but it was an age of invention. And it seemed that nothing could stop the onslaught of the forces of human advancement. The 1800s was an age of utopian thinking. Christians believed that they would gradually take over the world, that the gospel would conquer all nations. Karl Marx wrote about a proletarian revolution. Different groups formed little communities to work out their vision of Utopia, of a glorious future.

As the 1900s unfolded optimism gave way to great pessimism concerning the future. World War I, in particular, signaled the end of 19th Century optimism and the belief in inevitable progress as Europe plunged itself into the most barbaric war the world had ever known. And then following that, the worldwide depression, the advent of World War II and the even greater slaughter and then the revelation of the Holocaust, the dropping of the atomic bomb, the breakup of the world into two camps with the advent of the Cold War, the genocide and ethnic cleansing campaigns in Uganda and Rwanda and Cambodia and Serbia –

it is no wonder that as people contemplate the future entering the 21st Century, our vision of the future is of massive catastrophe.

Just look at the movies about the future that have been out over the last 10 to 20 years. You will virtually never find a movie about the future of the planet with happy families and happy community, lots of love being expressed. You have movies like "Escape from L.A." - this dark movie about total anarchy and lawlessness breakdown. Or the "Road Warrior" movies with Mel Gibson where after a nuclear holocaust, you have these folks living in the desert in these desolate communities. There are always almost no survivors, just a few, in these little pockets of these bleak little towns. And they are all fighting with each other over the remaining gas and the remaining water. They are mostly fighting for a little bit of gasoline.

Bleak, bleak movies. Movies like "The Cube" where in the future these folks are stuck inside of a Rubik's cube. The whole movie finds them trying to get out, but it all ends in total despair. Or "Blade Runner," where Harrison Ford needs to hunt down these cyborgs.

Or listen to some of the lyrics from the group REM. This is from their song called "It's the End of the World As We Know It."

That's great,
It starts with an earthquake,
Birds and snake, an aeroplane and
Lenny Bruce is not afraid.
Eye of a hurricane,
Listen to yourself churn -
World serves its own needs,
Dummy serve your own needs.
Feed it off an aux speak,
Grunt, no, strength,
Team by team reporters baffled,
Trumped, tethered cropped.
Look at that low playing!
Fine, then.
Uh oh, overflow,
Population, common food,
But it'll do.
Save yourself; serve yourself.
World serves its own needs,
Listen to your heart bleed
Dummy with the rapture
And the revered and the right, right.
You Vitriolic, patriotic,
Slam, fight, bright light, feeling pretty psyched.
It's the end of the world

As we know it.
It's the end of the world
As we know it.
It's the end of the world
As we know it
And I feel fine.
Six o'clock - TV hour.
Don't get caught foreign towers.
Slash and burn, return,
Listen to yourself church.
Locking in, uniforming,
Book burning, blood letting..
Every motive escalate.
Automotive incinerate.
Light a candle, light a votive.
Step down, step down.
Watch your heel crush,
Crushed, uh-oh, this means
No fear, cavalier. Renegade
Steer clear! A tournament,
Tournament,
A tournament of lies.
Offer me solutions,
Offer me alternatives
And I decline.
It's the end of the world
As we know it.
It's the end of the world
As we know it.
It's the end of the world
As we know it
And I feel fine.

Now, what is the popular Christian alternative to the future? The popular Christian alternative, and you see it in all of the best-selling books, could be summed up this way: He comes, we go, and then the whole world blows up.

Listen, this perspective of the future has nothing of Revelation 21 in it at all. See, the future painted in Revelation 21 is a glorious future. It is a new heaven and a new earth. It is the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven prepared as a bride beautifully dressed. A voice from the throne saying, "The dwelling of God is with men. He will live with them and they will be his people. God himself will be with them."

The vision of the future is a vision of community with each other. It is a vision of community with God. It is a vision of community on the earth where the earth

finally works the way it was designed to work. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. The vision of the future is a glorious future.

But doesn't it make sense that at a time when we are completely cut off from our pasts, the average American knows virtually nothing about history. Every July 4th and Memorial Day, or when we have a national holiday, someone does a survey asking people basic questions about the past. They are the most elementary questions of American history or world history. Americans in overwhelming numbers always fail the test. We are completely cut off from our pasts.

We are certainly, even as Christians, cut off from our Christian past. We know so little about the saints that have gone before us. We don't know the story of the early church. We don't know anything about how Christians lived or how we have gotten to this point in the history of the church.

We are not only cut off from the past, we are cut off from the future. Doesn't it make sense to you that if the future is as bleak as most people think, that folks are just going to grab for all the life they can now, try to suck the marrow out of the bone right now because there is nothing to look forward to.

But you see, if the future kingdom is about intimacy with God, God dwelling with us, and the future is about loving community with each other, us being part of the new Jerusalem, and if the future is about harmony with the world, so that every source of pain is removed from this planet and this universe, and if Jesus said that he was bringing something of that kingdom to be in this world now, then right now I don't have to go around searching for a thrill. Some adrenaline-pumping experience to artificially get me in touch with life. I can experience the life of the kingdom right now. As I walk with Jesus Christ, as I learn to love other people, I get to be connected to the life of the kingdom now.

What a different perspective than the perspective of almost our entire world, including Christians, that we have a future that matters. And it is a glorious future. It is an optimistic future.

Not only does the future matter, but the planet matters. A lot of folks think that the future of creation is that the heavens and the earth are going to be completely destroyed and annihilated, and they will be replaced by a totally new heaven and a new earth. That is a complete replacement of this space and time universe. And we say, "See here, it says, 'I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and first earth had passed away. And there was no longer any sea.'" In verse 4, "He will wipe away 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."

See here, the old universe is going to be thoroughly junked, thrown out on the trash heap, annihilated, evaporated and God is going to replace it with a totally new heaven and a new earth that will have absolutely no relationship to the old heaven and the old earth. In fact, the way that your car falls apart and you take it to the junkyard where the old car is crushed and junked and you go out and buy a brand new car.

That's how many Christians read these texts about the new heaven and the new earth – that our future and our planet in the future have absolutely no connection, no relationship between the present planet and what is going on at this time – that the new heaven and the new earth is beyond space and time.

It is no wonder then that there is again an overall feeling of despair and meaninglessness as we approach life at this time and on this planet. Hey, if it is all going to burn up, if God is just going to junk the world, then what difference does it make if we junk up the world a little bit ourselves? I mean if we exploit the planet and destroy the environment and gunk up the water and foul the air, kill the rainforests and a few thousand more species become extinct, so what? It is all going to burn up anyway. Haven't you heard Christians say that? That this is all going to burn up anyway. It is all going to be replaced by a new heaven and a new earth.

Is that what John meant to imply? A total replacement? A complete discontinuity between what is and what will be, so that what is currently doesn't matter at all because it is all going into the shredder?

I don't think so. See, John is using what we call apocalyptic language. It is the only language that is adequate to describe the significance of what will happen. But I don't believe that John or any of the biblical writers meant to suggest that the future kingdom expressed by the phrase "new heaven and new earth" is completely unrelated or a total replacement of the present heaven and the present earth.

I will share some of my reasons. First of all, if what is going to be junked is the creation, if God ultimately looks over creation and says it has been so fouled up by sin and by the effects of the fall, that the only thing I can do with this old creation is just junk it and burn it up and start all over, then ultimately Satan won and God lost the battle for the original creation. If the effects of the fall are so extensive that creation, this planet, the heavens and the earth can't be redeemed, that God has to start all over again, then ultimately Satan won in his grand act of rebellion. He really did permanently ruin God's original creation.

But this is not what is meant by the new heaven and the new earth, or even the passing away of the old earth. We come upon similar kinds of language in 2 Cor. 5 regarding the born again experience when a human being is invaded by the Holy Spirit. In 2 Cor. 5 the apostle Paul writes, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ,

he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” Something occurs so radical in a person’s life when the Spirit of God invades them, when they become citizens of the kingdom of God, that the only adequate way to describe this change is to say that the old has passed away and the new has come and you have become a new creation. You are the same person, yet you are radically different. My name was Rich before; my name is Rich now. I have the same genes and yet I am so radically changed as a result of Christ coming into my life that the only way to adequately describe the change is to say that I have become completely new.

The relationship between what you were – what some of you were before you came to Christ and what you are now - is a picture of the relationship between the planet now and the planet in the future. Let me give you another picture of what we experience now and what we will experience in the future from the Bible. Jesus’ resurrected body is a paradigm, it is a picture. When Jesus appeared to his disciples following his resurrection, it was the same Jesus that the disciples knew and walked and lived with for the three years before. In fact, his resurrected body had some resemblance to his old body. We read in John 20 that his resurrected body even had some of the scars from his crucifixion, and his disciples recognized that. There was something of Jesus’ old mannerisms and something about his voice and about the way he related that all said this Jesus in his resurrected body is the same Jesus that was crucified, that we walked with and who taught us for three years.

It is the same Jesus, yet a radically new Jesus. The resurrected Lord was so different that at first they didn’t recognize him. He didn’t merely return to his earthly existence, he went beyond it. And he had a body that was designed for life in the age to come.

So what is the relationship between the planet in the future and the planet now? It is not the relationship of total replacement. The planet now is going to be junked and the new planet is going to replace it. It is the relationship between our bodies now and our resurrected bodies. The relationship of our spiritual state before we came to Christ and our spiritual state after. It is the relationship of a seed now and fruit later. Continuity and discontinuity.

Here is the way to think about the future of the planet. What is going to be destroyed is not the creation as originally designed by God. What is going to be completely destroyed is sin and mortality – the principle of death. God is going to wash the universe of sin. Sin has never been designed to be a permanent part of the creation. That’s why John writes in I John 2 “Do not love the world or the things of the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, not the creation, but the sinful world, all that is in the sinful world – the lust of the flesh, the eye; the pride of life, is not of the Father, but of the world and the world is passing away and the lusts thereof.”

God is going to wash the universe of sin. And God is going to wash the universe of death. Mortality. So John writes in Reverse 21: "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 is gone." The old order of death, mortality, will be swallowed up by immortality, the perishable by the imperishable.

Friends, life is meaningless if it is all going to be burned up and replaced. But our vision of the kingdom in the future tells us that what we have to look forward to is not replacement, but transformation. Change. Renewal. Cleansing. The future matters. The planet that we currently live on matters.

And our bodies matter. What we do with our bodies matters. It says in verse 6, "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life." We will be drinking in the future. We will live in a city called the new Jerusalem. We will live in resurrected bodies on a renewed earth that has a renewed heaven freed from sin and freed from death.

This is so different from the common Christian understanding of the future kingdom. The common Christian understanding of the future is this: When I accepted Christ, that meant that my soul is saved for heaven and in the future I am going to live as some kind of disembodied wispy soul in some sort of spiritual realm called heaven.

This is not the biblical view. The biblical view is not you having some sort of a wispy thing called a soul that will be floating around in some sort of airy-fairy spiritual place called heaven. The Christian view is that if you are attached to Jesus Christ, you are going to have a resurrected body. And you are going to live on a concrete place called the New Earth, which I would call the Renewed Earth, in a completely renewed city that will have other people in resurrected bodies.

How did we ever get the idea that our future is anything less than concrete, substantial, bodily, and earthbound?

Well, as the gospel message, which arose in a Jewish context where Jews could not conceive of existence apart from being a body, as the gospel message moved out to the Greek world, to the Hellenistic world, the message was changed to your future is that your soul will be saved for heaven. The Greeks believed in an idea called the Immortality of the Soul.

And this kind of dualism between the soul and the body you see in medieval art. If you look back at the old paintings from the middle ages, the way they portrayed Jesus and the saints, he is not a real person. He is a very thin, almost emaciated person, a person from another planet with a halo around his head. His hands pressed together in a posture of prayer. You see this type of dualism today in

the church (in the charismatic Pentecostal wing of the church) where people are taught these major distinctions between your body and your spirit and your soul.

The Bible knows men and women only as unities. We don't exist apart from body. But here is the implication from all of this dualism and this view that in the future I am just going to live as a disembodied soul in this airy-fairy world called Heaven. It leads to the perspective that what I do with my body now really doesn't matter. See, just like before, if the earth is going to burn up, then so what if I junk up the earth. So what if corporate polluters decide to spew their garbage into our rivers or you dump some paint or kerosene or gasoline down the nearest sewer. What does it matter? The planet is going to burn up and end.

This is the way most people live concerning their bodies. They live with great dualism. You hear it when someone expresses the view that what I do sexually with my body doesn't really matter. It doesn't affect the real me. How many folks have the perspective that says "I am a good person, I just happen to do x or y sexually with my body. But that doesn't communicate anything about who I am. How dare you suggest that I am a bad person just because of what I do with my body. So what if I get drunk on the weekends or party? I, the essential me, the soul, am still OK."?

Now, this is not a biblical view. The biblical view is that you and your body are one. There is no division between what is going on inside of you and what you do with your body. You are eternally body. Your body matters. How you treat your body, what you feed your body, the prescription drugs you put into you body; if you cut your body or mar your body or pollute your body or unite your body sexually in a way or with someone you aren't supposed to – this all has ultimate significance.

There is no good person lurking inside of your bad body. There is just you.

And so the coming kingdom that we see in the future and that we taste right now involves not just the spiritual part of us, the religious part of us, the part of us that prays or reads the Bible – the coming kingdom involves the whole of us – our tastes, our desires, our talents, our joys, our interests, our bodies. But, if the body doesn't matter, then why not throw yourself off of a cliff and swing like a pendulum for a little while so that you could experience 11 seconds of life?

The future matters. This planet matters. Our bodies matter. And relationships matter. Notice the new Jerusalem is described as coming down out of heaven from God prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.'"

Our future is all about intimacy with God. A kind of intimacy that could only be described as being like the relationship of a bride to her groom on their wedding day. The fulfillment of God's plan is captured by the writer of Revelation as being like that most intimate of earthly relationships – the relationship of a bride to her groom. Full of tenderness, full of love, full of intimacy. The ultimate relationship of God to people is not master to slave; it is not potter to pottery; it is not shepherd to sheep; it is not builder to house. All of these have an aspect to our relationship with God. But the ultimate relationship, the height of the thing, is we are related to God as a bride would be related to her husband in the perfect marriage. Where we are not dominated. We are not controlled. We are not browbeaten. We are romanced. We are wooed. We see our husband, it stays in Reverse 22, face to face. And so when Jesus says that the kingdom of God is at hand, that future kind of romance and intimacy that we are going to have with our heavenly husband, we are supposed to taste some of that now.

And not only is the future kingdom about relationship with Christ our husband, but it is about relationship with each other. Notice that the kingdom is described not as an isolated country place or a desert island where you are alone or a cabin in the woods a million miles away from the nearest other inhabitant. The new Jerusalem is described as a holy city.

I don't know what your vision of paradise is – it might be a house in the country or a deserted Pacific island beach – you may be looking for a piece of heaven in the country, just like John Denver – “Almost heaven, West Virginia.” But the ultimate goal or existence is a city. But it's a clean city. It is a renewed city. It is a redeemed city. The ultimate goal is a community with each other where God builds the city. It is not Babylon of Reverse 18 or the Tower of Babel that men tried to build in Gen. 11. This is a city that comes down from heaven and is a city built by God. Just like the bride in Reverse 21 is not the whore of Babylon of Reverse 18, it is a pure spotless virgin ready for her husband.

John goes on to describe the city. Verse 11, it says, “It shone with the glory of God” so that it goes beyond – the whole city is like the ancient temple. Whereas the ancient temple in one small room contained the presence of God, the city is filled with the glory of God. The city becomes the Holy of Holies. It says that it had a great high wall in verse 12, with 12 gates. Of course, the wall is meant to suggest that God's people will be secure. But the gates of the city are always opened. Verse 25, “On no day will its gates ever be shut.” The city of God is accessible. The glory of God is accessible. It is secure and accessible.

And it is built on the names of the 12 apostles of the Lamb. Ancient benefactors used to have their names inscribed on the city's foundations. Here we are building the future kingdom on the lives of the holy apostles.

And the city is unimaginably huge – 1,500 miles as a cube, extending into the heavens. It is made of pure gold. The foundations are decorated with every kind of precious stone. It is a prosperous city.

But the point is that the city is a representation of eternal community. Where God is taking us is not toward future isolation – me and Jesus; but toward future community. When you get the idea that the kingdom in the future is all about community, then you understand that the taste of the kingdom now is to be the practice of a community of love now. It is the most foreign thought in the mind of Jesus to talk about the kingdom of God as just your individual relationship with Christ. Who cares about how you relate to the church – whether you are turned off by church or are into it? It's really just a matter of you and Jesus.

That is not the future kingdom. The future kingdom is part of being the bride of Christ, but also being part of the city of God. And the kingdom of God shows right now in your intimacy with God, but also in your practice of love. So that anything that breeches love with each other, all the ways that we are unreconciled with other Christians, is a denial of the kingdom.

The future matters. The planet matters. Your bodies matter. Relationships matter. And our choices matter. Look at verses 6-8, "He said to me, 'It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life.'" You don't have to look for life at the end of a bungee cord or through evermore exotic sexual relationships or through the acquisition of more stuff or a more extravagant vacation.

Jesus Christ promises to give life to those of us who are thirsty for life. And he goes on to say, "He who overcomes will inherit all of this, and I will be his God and he will be my son. 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."

Verse 8 is all about the ultimate tragedy. Our choices in this world matter. The kingdom of God is about a line being drawn between people. Today it seems that everyone is pretty much the same. We are all just mixed up together, thrown together. But in the future, a line will be drawn. Verse 8 speaks to us of the ultimate tragedy. It talks about folks whose place will be the fiery lake of burning sulfur.

There are lots of different pictures of hell in the Bible. There is a picture of burning in the Old Testament. The Jews likened hell to a place called Gehinna. That was the garbage dump south of Jerusalem. I laughed the first time I drove around Columbus, and I saw the suburb named Gahanna. I said to Marlene at that time, "Don't the people who named this town know what Gahanna means?"

It was the valley south of Jerusalem where criminals were buried and garbage was burned. It was a place where garbage was perpetually burning.

What an incredible tragedy to invest your life into what ultimately will just be burning garbage. How much of your life is spent in what is just going to be burning garbage? It will amount to nothing. Imagine one's whole life being invested in burning garbage and you, yourself, becoming human garbage.

Hell is described not only by fire; it is described as being excluded. Revelation 21:27 says, "Nothing impure will ever enter the holy city, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life." A picture of hell in the Bible that is continually used is one of being excluded. It is being shut out. It is having the door slammed in your face. It is coming to God and having him slam the door and saying, "Depart from me, I never knew you." It is being cast out of the wedding feast of the Lamb. Barred. It is being shut into outer darkness. Paul calls it being shut out from the presence of the Lord.

The Bible calls hell a place of weeping. I think of hell as a place of ultimate regret. Where those who have completely failed to reach their potential, those who have failed to live according to God's design for their lives, where God invested in you so many talents and so much potential, but you decided to waste it. Hell is a place of tears because it is a place of ultimate regret.

Too many people reach old age and look back and imagine about what could have been, but never was because of their sin and selfishness. They look back and they say, "You know, I could have had a decent marriage." Or, "I could have had kids who now love me." Or "I could have had self-respect." "I could have lived a life of love for God. I could have lived a life of love for others, but I didn't."

Hell is regret to the billionth power and the inability to change what you should have and could have been.

Friends, this business of lines being drawn in the kingdom, the business of judgment, the business of one day standing before God – what all of this says is that your little choices right now matter. What you do with your body matters. What we do with the planet matters. Our future matters. But most of all your choices matter. The thing that makes you most human, the thing that speaks most of your personality, your reflection of God, is your choice, your freedom to choose one direction or another.

There is not determinism in this world. You can choose to go a different way. No matter how far down the road you find yourself in some behavior or some relationship, God right now in this world offers a fork in every single road and says, "You can take a different way." If you live a life of love for God and a life of love for others, in the end you get God and you get community with others.

But if you live a life of selfishness, in which every single one of your decisions is all about you, and you are consumed with you and your needs and your hurts and your wants, and there is no room for anyone else and there is no room for God and for the doing of his will, it is all about you and your thoughts – then in the end God gives you what you've lived for. Hell is ultimate total loneliness where you are left to yourself. It is the final trajectory of the selfish self-centered life. No community, no friends, no acquaintances.

See, the dignity of life consists in the fact that we ultimately do get the fruit of our choices. The dignity of our lives consists in the fact that our decisions are meaningful. That our little choices matter. That we are moving our being one way or the other – toward or away from the love of God. You start the Christian life by making a choice toward God. But day by day we are inclining our hearts one way or the other. And we ultimately get the fruit of what we are about. Every choice strengthens or weakens your character. It makes you more fit for the new Jerusalem or more fit for hell. You might be becoming more like human garbage fit for Gehenna or more beautiful, fit to be married to the Lord Jesus Christ.

The reality of the kingdom means that your life can be about making yourself, making this planet, making other people more beautiful as we await the coming of our Lord. Let's pray.

Life in the Kingdom

Rich Nathan
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The Kingdom of God Series
Revelation 21-22:1-5

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- II. The Planet Matters
- III. Our Bodies Matter
- IV. Our Relationships Matter
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