

## Recovering Our Christian Hope

It's good to be back from my trip to Russia. Three of us, Jerry Stephens, Jim Meyer and I went over to St. Petersburg to visit the church planting team that we have there from this Vineyard and a couple of others. As a lot of you know, we are leading a church planting effort in the city of St. Petersburg, Russia. I can tell you that things there are going really quite well. I think that the church plant is going to be successful. I think that by the end of the summer we should have probably 100 or so adults gathered into a church and probably seven small group formed. So, things are moving along. Those of you who know the Mayton's, I can just share with you a report that they are doing quite well. Craig is perfectly suited for this particular work. He was made for Russia!

Well, this morning what I am going to do is to begin a new series that I feel led by the Lord to do. It is going to be about things pertaining to the future. I have never done a series of talks, in any systematic way, on the what is called in the Bible, the *blessed hope*. The return of Christ for his people; the signs preceding Christ's return; the rise of anti-Christ; various things that will happen in the world before anti-Christ is revealed; the conversion of the mass of Jewish people to Christ, which is one of the great signs of the return of the Lord—the conversion of the Jews.

And, I can tell you, by the way, we were at a conference in St. Petersburg. It was for Jewish people, put on by Messianic Jews. There were 1500 people in attendance, most of them Jews, responding to the call for salvation. It was quite an exciting time. Russian Jews are being swept into the Kingdom at a rate of conversion that really has not been seen since the first century. We are seeing a mass of Jewish people responding to the gospel.

We are going to be talking about that and the gospel being preached to every ethos, every people group—hidden peoples. And then the great coming of the Lord, followed by the judgment; the millennium; hell. I am actually going to do a talk on eternal judgment and hell. And, finally, as we wrap it up, with the new heavens and the new earth.

Let me share with you why I believe this series needs to be preached in a clear way, in a systematic way, for this church and for people living at this time in history. Let me just use a little illustration. I was flying from Germany back to this country and I was looking at the massive jet engines that were propelling the plane. It struck me that we would have a lot of trouble if one of those engines blew. The plane I was on would fly a lot lower if we lost one of the major jet engines.

As I was looking at those wings and the engines, it occurred to me that one of the major engines that propel Christians forward has blown in the post modern world. Christianity is kept aloft by a trinity of virtues. The Bible calls them faith,

hope and love. Paul says: "Faith, hope and love, abide these three." He uses these that trinity of virtues in a number of places. In 1 Thessalonians, chapter 1; in Colossians 1 he says: "The faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven." In 1 Thessalonians, chapter 5 he talks about putting on faith and love as a breast plate. He is describing the armor of God He says: "Put on faith and love as a breast plate and for a helmet the hope of salvation."

There are three engines that propel the Christian life forward—faith, hope and love. Whereas, I believe that in the post-modern world, Christians talk a great deal about faith and putting your faith in Christ; and a great deal about love and loving one another; meeting felt needs; being sensitive and seeker sensitive. I am increasingly convinced that the engine on hope is almost completely blown out of the Christian jet liner.

There is virtually no discussion at any meaningful level about the future in almost any Christian book, or in almost any so-called Christian therapy. Now, we try to do that differently in the Vineyard. But, if you pick up popular books that deal with depression from a so-called Christian perspective, or give counsel about money from a so-called Christian perspective, or even about missionary service, or church growth, or evangelism, what you will find almost entirely lacking is any serious discussion about the Christian hope, about the return of Christ, or about heaven as a real place and a driving force in the Christian life.

We wonder why the plane of our lives flies so low and why the ride is so bumpy. It is because we are trying to fly without hope. We have nothing in the future that we are looking forward to as post-modern people. I would venture to say that for the average post-modern man or woman, the supernatural, and even demons, are infinitely more real and concrete and acceptable than is the notion that Christ is actually going to return to this earth and set up a millennial kingdom that will be followed by the new heavens and the new earth, populated by the people of God. The blessed hope is so profoundly unreal to people living in 1993 that we have carved out of the Christian consciousness—the guts—a major locomotive for Christian behavior and Christian ethics.

In today's talk I am going to give a little defense for why I am doing this kind of series on heaven and on the return of Christ when there are so many things that are practically effecting our lives. We struggle with job problems and with very concrete marital issues and very concrete sexual problems and various kinds of addictions. We come to church looking for a little bit of help and a little bit of comfort to deal with our lives right now. Why discuss and take people's time up with a story of heaven and things pertaining to the future? I want to give a very simple defense for the whole series because bottom line—it is inescapable, if we are going to be a biblical people, which is my desire in my heart and why I get up here Sunday after Sunday, it is to lay a foundation of sound teaching for the church so that we can live out the full dimensions of this book. It is an inescapable fact of this book, not of the post-modern mind, but an inescapable fact of this book, that the only way to live a high quality life now is to be filled with a concrete hope for the return of Christ and the glory that is awaiting you.

So, we are going to fly high. I am going to trust God to do what the Apostle Paul asked for in Ephesians, chapter 1, verse 18 where he prayed: "That the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints." Perhaps, week by week, your consciousness and the reality of the things that I am speaking about will increasingly be grasped by you so that you can actually feel heaven breaking in on you and taste it and sense it. And live in accordance with that fresh new reality that you are discovering about the future. Today, I am going to call this talk, in accordance with the series that I am doing: **Recovering Our Christian Hope**. Let's pray.

What I am trying to do today is to give you a little bit of apologetic defense for the whole series and to show you that the contemplation of things to come is immensely practical in this life and in this world. Not only for you and for your own happiness, but also in your ability to impact the world around you for Christ. Before I left, I was doing a series on Outreach and the need for Christian people to have an extroverted impact on the world around them. You might think, "My goodness! Now, we are talking about heaven and the return of Christ. We are completely at some radical disjuncture from what we were talking about before. We are launching off into some Christian pietism."

Nothing could be further from the truth. Your impact on the world around you is directly related to your ability to lay hold of the things that I am going to be talking about. You see, we live in a country that is filled with people claiming to be victims. People who do not know how to encounter difficulties without whining and self pity. One of the distinctly Christian virtues that you can bring to the world around you is a unique way—a stunning way, a shocking way to handle your disappointments, your difficult circumstances, your troubles and your trials. A distinctively Christian way of responding to difficult circumstances in your life will impact your circle of influence in a way that virtually nothing you could say or do could as profoundly impact. And, to a generation of addicts, not only victims, but a generation of addicts, of people who are living out all of the consequences of a self-indulgent, no holds barred, no rules, no limits kind of behavior. A generation of people who are ripped and torn and bruised. The impact of a group of people who are able to distinctively delay gratification, who are able to say "no" to current self-indulgence. Whether we are talking about self-indulgence in the area of sex or self-indulgence in the area of material, or self-indulgence in careers, or self-indulgence in divorce—of people who can say "no" to self-indulgence will shine as lights in the darkness.

A distinctively Christian way to handle difficulty, a distinctively Christian way to delay gratification, the impact of such Christian distinctiveness is incalculable. Both Christians distinctives are tied in the New Testament to the recovery of our Christian hope.

Let's look together to Romans 8, verse 18. Paul says: "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will

of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God."

What I am saying, first of all, is that if you want to stun people and impact callous, hardened, cynical, post-modern people, then beyond the discussion of the supernatural, you have a weapon in your bag. That is a distinctively Christian way to relate to difficulty and to suffering. It is something that will absolutely stun folks around you. They will say: I can figure out a lot of why this person does what they do. But, what I can't figure out is why they are not bitter about being treated by the boss that way. Why they are not complaining or gossiping, or doing everything like what other people do. They are not politicking. They are not moaning and whining. I don't get it. They actually seem cheerful. How can someone be in a hospital bed, how can that woman lie there and still be cheerful and actually be a blessing and an encouragement to the hospital staff? We don't get it. Why is there family who comes in actually a bright spot in an otherwise gray day? What is it about them that makes this family at this hospital at this time so different? Something is going on here that is not entirely normal.

The revelation of God in your distinctively Christian way of suffering is one of the great ways that the divine glory shines through you as an earthen vessel. It is a power. A distinctively Christian way of suffering is a great power that you have as a believer in Jesus. If you have come to faith in Christ, it is a power that you have to confront people with the reality of God. Perhaps you don't make use of that power enough.

Do you remember that tough Roman soldier who knelt down at the cross—the centurion who had seen hundreds of people crucified before, suffering and dying. He had watched the blood and the gore and had never been moved before. Tough guy. What was it that brought about his conversion? Was it seeing miracles—the blind seeing, the lame walking? What blew his crustiness to shreds and made him tender and soft and open to God again? It was watching the way that Jesus suffered and died and nothing more. He never saw a man die the way that Jesus died. The centurion watched hundreds of crucified men curse God in their agony—crying out to passersby for pity and mercy. Never did he see a crucified man actually extend pity to those who were passing by. Not ask for pity, but extend pity toward his attackers. So much so, that he actually prayed: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." It was watching the way that Jesus suffered and died that caused this tough Roman soldier to say: This is the Son of God. This must be. Because no human being would relate and react to pain the way that this man is reacting.

I think of the martyr, Stephen, and I am convinced in my own heart that Stephen won more in his death and in his prayer for those who were throwing stones at him than he ever won in his life. The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. That is what Tertullian, an early church father, said. What gives birth to the church is the suffering of faithful Christians who suffer in a distinctively Christian way.

Before we take a close look at Romans, chapter 8, let's remember that we often don't react well to difficulty—right? I think of Psalm 73 and how the writer

was so envious of other people. He looked at his lot in life and he tried to follow God. He tried to do the right thing. He tried to obey the rules. Everything in his life was falling apart. Like a woman who says: You know, I have tried to follow God and come to church and become a Christian. I thought my life would get better and then my boyfriend broke up with me. I am all alone. I have \$2000 in bills and my car just broke down. My job is not going well. I thought that if I became a Christian that things would go well and they are not. In fact, people who don't give any thought to God at all, some of the worst people in the world, are getting ahead of me. It is not worth it.

Have you ever thought that? What gives? You are trying to play it straight. You are trying to play the game according to the rules. And, you are falling behind. People who break the rules are getting ahead. You scratch your head and think to yourself (have you ever thought): This ain't worth it! It makes no sense to try to be good; to try to do good and to do right because in the end it is all a crap-shoot. The benefits and the drawbacks of life are just sort of distributed, not according to any plan, but just totally at random.

I talk with people all the time about faith in God. Very often I get this argument back: Hey, friend, it isn't worth it. My grandfather was a pastor and let me tell you what happened to him. Then, they will describe this horrible set of circumstances that occurred in his life. He had an accident; or that the church threw him out. Or that their parents used to go to church and that this is a disastrous thing that occurred. With all of the honesty of the Bible—the Bible is an incredibly honest book—this is what the Psalmist says in Psalm 73: "I envy the arrogant. I envy people who sin. They have no struggles. They are always carefree, always healthy. In vain [listen to this] in vain, have I washed my hands in innocence." It is not supposed to turn out this way. I thought that if I tried, if I really walked with you, God, it would be like a fairy tale. You know, I would live happily ever after. And, this guy is doing better than me. "In vain have I kept my heart clean."

We Christians don't always react in a distinctively Christian way to our pain, to our victimization, do we? We often do get bitter. We often do get envious. We often do gossip. We do talk to the woman at work about something that happened. We do talk with our parents and do yell. Lots of times, we do succumb to doubt when we say: My Father in heaven doesn't care about me. If he cared about me, he wouldn't be letting this thing happen. He must not care. If he doesn't care, then I am not going to care either. If he is not going to put any energy into the system, then why should I? How do you get out of this kind of a trap? If he doesn't care, I don't care? It is so natural to get bitter at God and to be disappointed. Some thing that you wanted to work out in your life and it hasn't worked out.

Well, let me take another tact on this. Very often we are forced or called upon to relate to somebody who is going through a major difficulty. Your life may be going well, but you are required to relate to somebody who is going through a major difficulty. Maybe they have lost their husband or lost their job, or lost a child, suffered a major disappointment—a broken engagement. Discovering that they have a disease—What do we say? What kind of comfort do we really have

for someone who is in real pain? What words do you have to encourage somebody who is really struggling?

Lots of times what you will hear boils down to nothing more than: Hey, you shouldn't feel that way. It is not so terrible. We trivialize people's pain. That is not Christian counsel. Don't hear me saying that at all. We try to trivialize pain: It is not really so bad. What you are going through is not so horrible. We can make light of another person's suffering and leave a person feeling that they are being foolish for feeling the weight of their pain. Of course, their reaction is going to be: You don't understand. You don't know what it feels like to be married and to go home every night to somebody and just want them to say something kind to you just one time. Even just to talk to you. They never talk to you. You are married and you try to be faithful and all you want is for the other person to hug you once and to tell you that they love you. And, they never do. You don't understand what it feels like to live in a loveless marriage.

Some of you would make wonderful mothers. The cry of your heart is to be a mom. That door is not open for you. There is just no prospect on the horizon for you to have children. How can somebody else understand that? Maybe, if we don't make light of it as we are talking with someone else, we compare one person's suffering with another. We say: Listen, your situation is not as disastrous as it could be. Look, half the world is starving. Or, goes to bed at night and sleeps in nothing more than what we would call a wood shed.

We offer cheap comfort and cheap counsel. We explain to somebody the various stages of grief. Maybe they will get some insight regarding the stages of grief, but they have no real answers—nothing that is distinctively Christian. Hear me out.

Our Father, in the Bible, never tells somebody who is going through suffering that it is no big deal. Our Father never trivializes someone's pain. Our Father, in heaven, never ever rebukes somebody for grieving. His Son grieved and wept at the tomb of Lazarus, his friend, when he died, setting for us an example that it is appropriate to grieve and to feel the pain of suffering. Our Father, in heaven, doesn't say: Why are you hurting. It is really not as bad as it could be for you. I can make it a lot worse. Certainly, it is not as bad as so-and-so's situation.

What our Father does say to his children is that there is a way of escape from being bitter and envious and disappointed. There is a way to suffer that is distinctively Christian. The way that the Father instructs us in not by making fun of us, but by restoring hope in the midst of our difficulties.

Now what the Father, in heaven, does do in bringing a real answer for human beings is so different that what we might experience in—what I hope not in this church and in the kind of counsel that you would get here—but, in general, in most Christian therapy books, he calls us to link together two thoughts in our hearts. Your present difficulty and present suffering and the future hope of glory. Over and over, and I could quote many many passages, on your own you can check out 2 Cor. 4, or Hebrews, chapter 12, or John, chapter 16.

But here what God is saying in Romans 8: Children, my beloved children, what I want you to do is take your present situation and what you are going through and compare it with what is awaiting you in the future. Don't compare

your situation, whatever your situation is, with someone else's situation. Don't do that. Because if you compare your lot in life with someone else's lot in life, you will be bitter or envious, or disappointed with God, or you will gloat or be proud. The only way out for you is to draw a totally different comparison. Not you compared to someone else, but your situation compared to the glory and the hope that is being revealed. That is why verse 18 says: "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."

Paul says: I consider [it means I have concluded, I have thought about] my suffering. I am not living the way some Christians live in a total state of denial. Oh, glory to God, I am not going through any difficulty at all. Me, going through pain? No. I realize that I have just stepped on a nail, but, you know, that is OK. My car just wrapped around the tree? No problem. My kid ran away. That is fine. The dog is throwing up all over the carpet. Who cares? Paul says: I have thought about it. I am not cutting my head off, but I have concluded that by God's grace that my present suffering is not worth comparing with the glory that is going to be revealed in us.

See what the Father is challenging you to do? He is challenging you to do something that is not natural to do for a post-modern man or woman. A man or woman who is living in the city of Columbus with post-modern architecture like the downtown convention center where the lines don't make any sense at all. Or, the Wexner Center where there is no straight lines. And, this post-modern mind runs through everything. Through the way that we handle our sexual behaviors. There is no lines. It is all blown up. The way we write movies and TV shows, like *Northern Exposure*, there are no straight lines.

What the Father is challenging us to do is to put all of our problems and everything that you have gone through on one side of the scale. If you just let that side of the scale exist by itself, it is going to weigh you down. It is going to be a burden. Then he says: But, I don't want you to just live that way, with just your suffering on one side of the scale, as if that is the only reality that exists. I want to put something on the other side of the scale. The hope that is coming to you in the future. The glory. My glory that you are going to receive. I want to put something else in your consciousness, in your heart, in your feelings, in your emotions, that is so real and so heavy that it will weigh, in comparison and in reality, in a way that is much greater than your present difficulty.

Now this is distinctively Christian advice in depression. To compare your present situation with the glory and the hope that we will be revealed to you in the future, so that in comparison, the present situation will feel lighter. 2 Corinthians 4:17: "For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all." Your troubles being light in themselves? Absolutely not. But, in comparison with glory: Yes, they are much lighter.

You talk about a radical impact on this generation to have a people who are not regularly bitter—this is the Father's continual answer, in part [not complete answer, but in part] to difficulty: that we continually need to drop into the other side of the pan the coming eternal weight of glory. Isn't that why Jesus said to

his disciples: "Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. You believe in God, believe also in me for in my Father's house are many mansions [or many rooms] and if it were not so, I would not have told you. But, I go to prepare a place for you. And, if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and bring you onto myself, that where I am, you may be also."

So, what I am saying is the reason why the vast vast majority of us, including me, do not suffer well, don't suffer in a distinctively Christian way, have adopted the basic victimized approach of this world without anything to compensate—many of us have been victimized—but without anything to compensate it with is because we have no real vision of eternal glory or the hope awaiting us.

Then, as I mentioned before, there is not only a distinctively Christian way to relate to difficulty in a world that complains and whines and increases victims by the day, but there needs to be a distinctively Christian way to delay gratification in a world that is so profoundly addicted and self-indulgent. I believe that delayed gratification in all areas of life is tied in the Bible to the blessed hope of the Lord's coming and the new heavens and the new earth. Look at Romans 8:22-25 "We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we, ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait [we delay gratification] eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is not hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently."

Those of you who are familiar with the Bible may wonder how the so-called heroes of the faith were able to live such high quality lives having such profoundly radical obedience to God. How did the heroes of the faith get to be heroes? I am sure that if we talk with Abraham or Moses or some modern heroes of the faith, like Billy Graham, Chuck Colson, or Joni Erickson—they don't feel like heroes. When we look at them they are role models, they are heroes, they are examples. Abraham was willing to leave his familiar home and family and everything and go out. There was a radicalness to his obedience to God. What provides the radicalness to the Christian life? He was so radical that in Genesis, chapter 22, he was willing to sacrifice even his son, Isaac, when called upon to do so by the Lord. How do we get to that place? How do you get to be a hero or heroine of the faith? To aim high?

The 11th chapter of the book of Hebrews tells us that all of these men and women who seem so different than us, are really very much like us. Only they had the reality of the future. The reality of heaven impressed on their consciousness. Everyone of these heroes was looking forward to something more. Their plane was flying so high because it had this third engine on it of Christian hope. Not just faith in Christ; not just trying to love other people; but, Christian hope for the future. We need a restoration of hope.

Now listen, people are saying: You Christians are always talking about heaven. Pie in the sky. Karl Marx called it the opiate of the masses. People ask for something practical. Give me a way to live better in this world. Give me a way to have a better marriage; to relate better to my kids; to have a better work life; more success emotionally. Hebrews 11 and this passage that we are



looking at in Romans says that the only way to live a high quality life is to let your thinking run all the way forward past today, past tomorrow, past next year, past ten years from now, all the way to eternity. To stop the dead-end thinking in your mind and to let your mind run forward all the way to eternity.

See, one of the most basic character building principles that is virtually gone in post-modern culture is the principle of delayed gratification. We try to build that character principle into our children, even though we ourselves as Baby-Boomers know so little of it. We never had one of our desires at all checked. That is the baby-boom generation. No delayed gratification. But, we try to teach our children some lessons that perhaps we didn't learn, at least that is what I am trying to do with my kids and I say: No, you can't play now because you have to do your homework. I am trying to teach them that they can sacrifice some immediate pleasure for long-term gain. They can learn the discipline of having to sit there with a book, having to work and to think, to concentrate. Because that will assist them in the future.

People work incredibly long hours at entry-level positions. Some of you who are physicians went through long years of schooling and internships and residencies because you had your eye on the goal. You could see the future. Single people resist having sex for the same reasons.

Let me tell you, it is so difficult to convince a single person to delay gratification in sex—in a sex drenched society. How do you do it? I believe one of the major engines has been pulled out of the plane, which is to look ahead. It is not just that sex is wrong, presently, if you are not married. It is wrong and it is sin. But, one of the great reasons to delay gratification is so that you can have a stronger and better relationship in the future. You say: I won't do it now so that I can have a phenomenal relationship in marriage later on. And, I can have a sexual relationship without all the hold-overs of guilt and jealousies and pain. You come and you talk honestly, single people or teenagers, you sit down and you talk honestly with married couples and ask them: Did you have sex before you were married? Look them in the eye and ask them that. Then, you ask them that if they did have sex, what was the consequence in terms of their present level of difficulty sexually, in terms of their present discomfort with the whole subject, in terms of their present shame from past relationships and all the problems that got dragged into their marriage because they didn't wait, and they will be honest with you. We delay gratification because it is good for us.

Psalms 17, verse 14 David prays to God, he says to God: God, save me from people in this world whose reward is simply in this life. In other words: Lord, I don't want to think that way that people in this world the way people in this world generally think and process. I don't want to think the way that everyone at my job thinks. Everybody in my office thinks; everybody in my school thinks, I want to think differently, Lord. I would like to think in a distinctively Christian way. Protect me, oh God, from the counsel and advice of other people who will tell me continually that I better get mine right now because there isn't going to be anything later on. Save me, oh Lord, from those who say that it is stupid to delay gratification, that they are having such a blast indulging themselves, right now, and that that is the only way to live—to get out of bad marriages; to get out of

difficult circumstances; the only way to live is to live in the present, right now, for this moment because there is nothing coming. Help me to live the lesson of Jesus' first miracle, Father, where Jesus turned water into wine. The steward of the wedding said something that was really profound to the bridegroom that day, Father. He said: Everyone serves the best wine first; but, you have saved the best until last. That is your method, Lord. To delay. To cause your people to wait upon you. Help me not to be taken in by the lie that I have to have the best now because I won't get anything good later, since you always save the best until last.

Everybody, all of the books, all of the counselors, and all of your friends, and all of the advice columnists will tell you that you need to get it all now. You need to maximize your happiness now. Except those who have a distinctively Christian approach to your care and formation of your thinking, who will be honest enough to tell you to wait, because there is something better coming.

Even creation, Paul says in Romans 8, is waiting. The earth is waiting. The mountains are waiting. The oceans are waiting. The whole of creation is groaning because it knows that this can't be all that there is. There must be something more than this present existence. The groan of creation is because it is looking forward to something in the same way as a woman who is going through labor groans. But, she is able to endure because she is looking forward to the delivery of the baby. Delaying gratification. The quality of perseverance, of staying at something. The willingness to radically obey, to give it all up to be a missionary. To give away some of your money instead of buying the full option package on your new car. The willingness to sacrifice, to give to church. To give to your parents or to someone else. The engine for that is your ability to see the future. To look ahead. Just as the distinctively Christian way of suffering involves being able to weigh in on the other side eternal glory, a distinctively Christian way to delay gratification is to be able to see the eternal glory that is about to be ours.

Let's finish today, then, with a little description of the glory that is coming by looking, finally, at Revelation, chapter 21 and 22. Revelation, chapter 21 describes the new Jerusalem, the new heavens and the new earth that is coming after the return of the Lord and after the millennium. I am going to start this series at the end and then role it back to the beginning.

It says: "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 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.'"

I want you to erase from your minds the view that many of you may have of heaven as being sort of a ghost-like existence. People floating around on clouds and being transparent. You can see through them. This ephemeral, almost unreal kind of place where people are playing harps and sitting on clouds. That

is not the Bible description of the future. The Bible description is first of all very concrete. It is life in a city, but not a city like Columbus. It is the new Jerusalem. If you want to understand the history of the human race—where we have been and where we are going—and if you want to understand the book of Revelation, you could put it all under the title: "It is a tale of two cities." That is what our history is about. It is the tale of two cities. The city of man, symbolized in Revelation 17 by Babylon and the city of God, symbolized by the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven.

The city of man is what man builds and creates and how we organize life. The city of God is a city not made by human hands, whose origin is in heaven. But, it comes down to earth. I appreciate the fact that this city is coming down to earth. So it is very concrete and very real. It will have all the bustle and activity and reality of city life. Don't worry, those of you who hate cities, this won't be a polluted city—a city with crime and crowds. You will have plenty of fresh air to breathe. The rivers are going to be nice and clean.

In this first description of this tale of two cities, the holy city of Jerusalem comes down and it is described as a bride made beautiful for her husband. One description of the coming glory is of intimacy with God. That what we are going to experience in the future is a great intimacy, as a bride would have an intimate relationship with her husband. Before, therefore, describing the city, itself, the author of Revelation talks with us about the people of the city. They are going to be like a bride to a husband; children to a father; God will be with them.

Do you know what this is like? What is going on here is like a man driving up to his wealthy estate. You pull around the circular driveway. You get out of the limo and he goes to this enormous house. The door opens and before he shows you the house, he shows you his family. He says: I want you to meet my wife. Honey, here is so-and-so. I want you to meet my children because these are the jewels, what he is most proud of is his family. God, our Father, before he describes the city, describes the people of the city because this is what he is most proud of. Here are my people. Here are the jewels in my crown. I am most proud of the relationship that I have with my people. A relationship of intimacy and love.

Here is the first thing that we note as we look forward to the future and try to weigh in eternal glory into our present existence is that there is coming a time when we will have great intimacy with our Father, in heaven. We will experience fully what it means to be his people, his bride. We are going to be living in a concrete, very real, very substantial city. It says in verse 10: "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." Again, the city is coming down to earth, the new earth that has been cleansed from sin and cleansed of corruption and earthquakes and all of that. And suffering. We are not going to be floating around up there somewhere, we are going to be living on a renewed earth in a city that has been made by God, so it is totally incorruptible. "It shone with the glory of God, its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal."

Now, here is a description of the city's walls. "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."

So, we have a description of intimacy coming. We have a description of a city made by God that we are going to live in. We have a description of the city's walls. What do the walls tell us about? The walls tell us that, first of all, we are going to be very secure in that new city. Nothing will harm us. Secondly, we will be separated from everything that is unclean. God is looking for a separated people. The city walls are built on the apostles and the Old Testament patriarchs. That tells us that there is going to be a universal embracing of Jew and Gentile in the city. This city is going to be big enough for the whole church—Jews and Gentiles, blacks and whites—we are all going to be living together in the new city built by God.

Let's look at the city. Here is a description. Now we have talked about city walls, let's talk about the city itself. "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." Check it out. The city is a perfect cube. It is as wide, 1500 miles wide, 1500 miles long, 1500 miles high—a perfect cube. What that tells somebody who is familiar with the Bible, as we think of what was made as a perfect cube? People who know their Bibles know that the Holy of Holies in the Old Testament temple was made as a perfect cube.

What this is trying to communicate is that just as the Holy of Holies in the Old Testament was the dwelling place of God, now the dwelling place of God is not going to be just in this one little special place in a walled off temple, behind a curtain. The dwelling place of God is going to be diffused throughout the whole city. The city itself, where we live, is going to be the dwelling of God. God's presence is going to be through the whole place. Every house is going to experience the presence and mark of God.

The building materials of the city—it talks about the wall was made of jasper. Jasper is what we see in the Old Testament as one of the descriptions of a vision of God. It is this red jewel that just beams like with flames. The city streets are going to be paved with pure gold, as pure as glass. You remember, again, I believe this is symbolic, but in the Old Testament temple, the inside of the Holy of Holies was covered with pure gold. What this is, again, communicating is this whole city is going to be permeated by the presence of God.

The blessing of the city—Revelation 22. "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb..." There is a river flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb. I believe that is the river of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God is often described in the Bible as being like water. In John 7, verse 37 Jesus says: "That if any man is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me as the scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." John goes on and he says: "By this he meant the Spirit." You know, many of us have wanted to experience a

greater fullness of the Spirit. We have even found some of you have come to the Vineyard because you were tired of dry, dusty kinds of religion. You said: Maybe there is something here. Maybe I can begin to experience the Holy Spirit in a better way. I hope that you will experience a greater fullness of the Spirit here at the Vineyard.

But there is a river coming in the new Jerusalem that is unlike anything that we can experience in this world, flowing from the Lamb and flowing from the Father. You will be able to drink of it without limit. That river will run right down the center of the city street and on either side of the city street and on either side of the river will be trees of life. It says: "On each side of the river stood the tree of life bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding it's fruit every month and the leaves of the trees of for the healing of the nation."

Here is God's eternal plan—to take the human race back to Eden, back to paradise and then go beyond Eden and beyond paradise, so that there are trees of life—not just one tree of life, but trees of life lining the road, right by the river drawing their life and their sustenance from the Spirit of God. They are yielding this abundance of fruit because our God is so abundant. The fruit is ever changing because our God is full of surprises and full of changes. The great blessing of the city, beyond drinking from the Holy Spirit and eating the fruit from the trees of life, is the experience that we will have of God. For it says: "No longer will there be any curse, the throne of God and the Lamb will be in the city and his servants will serve him. They will see his face." This is the ultimate. The highest good. The old theologians used to call it the "sunum bonum"—the highest good, to have a man or woman be able to look into the face of God. Moses prayed: Show me your face. He was only able to see a glimpse of the Lord's back. You struggle day after day wanting to just get some glimpse, some glimmer of God. What is coming is a day when you will be able to look not at his back, but right into his face. You will be able to look into his face without shame, without embarrassment, without disappointment, without guilt—to be able to look at God totally freely and openly and enjoyably.

There will be no more nights. They will not need the light of lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light and they will reign forever and ever. God's glory will be diffused throughout the whole city and we will reign with him, serving him, busy, but reigning with him.

Listen, we must restore the future to the church and to our lives. The Christian life makes no sense without the blessed hope. As Paul says: "If for this life only, we have hope in Christ." If it is only in this life that we have a relationship with Christ, if this is all there is, then we, Christians, are of all men and women most to be pitied. It would be like going through nine months of pregnancy and all through the labor and then not having a baby. A tremendous tragedy. It would be like working and working and then at the end of the week or month having no pay day. None. No fruit to show for your labor. It would be like going through High School and at the end of High School not earning a diploma. Some of the teens are sitting here getting nervous. Well, what I am going to be encouraging over the next several weeks is an end to our short-sightedness and an end to the kind of advice that you might be getting or counsel you might be getting from

outside of this church that tells you to think only in terms of this world. You may be down at half-time. You may be in the locker room right now, weighed down, being beaten. Your life is just a mess. The Christian hope is that when you go out in the second half, at the end of the game, you are going to win. You can persevere and endure because you are going to win.

There is a coming glory. There is a coming hope. We are citizens of heaven. From heaven we await a glorious Savior who will change our bodies to be like his glorious body and we will reign forever and ever. Amen.

Sermon—Sunday, May 23, 1993

Rich Nathan

### **Recovering Our Christian Hope**

- I. Why a series on the future?
- II. Two Christian Distinctives Driven by Hope
  - a. A distinctive Christian way to suffer (Rom. 8:18-21)
  - b. A distinctive Christian way to delay gratification (Rom. 8:22-25)
- III. The City of God (Rev. 21, 21)

