



## HEAVEN IS IMPORTANT...BUT IT'S NOT THE END OF THE WORLD

By Eric Holmberg

You would probably have to be over forty and have grown up in or around the church to remember the song, *This World Is Not My Home*. The gospel classic featured lyrics like:

*This world is not my home I'm just passing through ... I can't feel at home in this world anymore ...if Heaven's not my home then Lord what will I do?...Just up in Glory Land we'll live eternally, etc.*

According to Amazon, six different groups have used the song as an album title; although I think it's safe to say that the group Mescal Sheiks – with the song "Live From the Gates of Hell" as track seven – didn't intend for it to be taken reverently. And again according to Amazon, the song has been recorded over one-hundred-and-fifty times.

That's what you can call a real golden oldie.

Now I don't want to offend any of the millions who have drawn comfort and inspiration from this song. There is a sense in which Christians are to see themselves as "strangers and sojourners" (1 Pet. 2:11), to set our minds on things above rather than the things of this earth (Col. 3:2), and to be delivered from this present evil age (Gal. 1:4). As someone who over the last quarter-century has produced several documentaries exposing the seductive influences of this "evil age" as they manifest in music, television, movies and other founts of popular culture, I have done my share to help Christians obey their Father's admonitions to come out from the midst of Belial's world and be separate. (2 Cor. 6:14–18) But the song really is saying a lot more than just this. By presenting heaven/"glory land" as a radically separate realm from this world and as our final, eternal home, this song – along with a myriad of other songs, sermons, books, adages, etc. – presents a dualistic, neo-gnostic worldview that denies key aspects of the Gospel and the purposes for which Jesus died, rose, ascended and was seated at the right hand of God.

Allow me to explain.

First a couple of definitions and a brief history lesson are in order. *Gnosticism*, the idea if not the word, has been around since the Fall and, in fact, was part and parcel of it. But it was Greek philosophy that perhaps best developed and popularized the concept. It is simply defined as "salvation by knowledge," most often a knowledge that is exclusive, hidden from the average person. The reason for its exclusivity lies in a primary plank of Gnosticism: the notion that the temporal, physical world is corrupt; a deterioration from the pure world of Spirit from which it fell. So to discover this saving knowledge, to get to the truth that lies hidden behind the veil of the material world, one must use philosophy or some other mental regimen, sometimes coupled with a physical discipline

of some kind (meditation, asceticism or, ironically enough, hedonism) or even the use of mind-altering substances in order to transcend into what *Plato* called the *realm of ideas or forms*.

This naturally leads to *dualism*, a metaphysical system that posits a two-tiered reality: the world of material appearances as perceived by our senses and processed through our limited minds (what Immanuel Kant called the *phenomenal* world) – and the higher, ultimate essence that exists in and of itself, independent of the mind (Kant's *noumenal* world.)

Now from a Christian worldview perspective there is truth in these ideas – which is why they are so pervasive and powerful. But untethered from the full counsel of God's word, they can easily pendulate into error and even downright heresy. And this possibility is amplified by the simple fact that as a metaphysical system, dualism/gnosticism exists at a foundational or presuppositional level. This means that it not only colors a person's understanding of everything else, it also becomes something most people are not even consciously aware they believe. Like a pair of rose-tinted glasses that a woman forgets she has on, everything takes on a reddish hue which is now mistaken by her as the way things really look.

Many (most?) Christians today are wearing glasses, metaphorically speaking, that have been tinted with the stain of gnosticism/dualism. To one degree or another, they view the world and their bodies as something they need to escape from. (I remember in my early days of campus ministry telling people that our bodies were just our "earth suits." There's even a Christian band by that name!) And more to the point, they see heaven as their final home; a place where they will eternally dwell. Some, ignoring or forgetting the physical resurrection promised in scripture (Dan. 12:2-3; Eze. 37:1-12; Isa. 26:19; 1 Cor. 15: 42-56; 2 Cor. 5:1-5; Phil. 3:21) think they will be like the angels of God, existing in some spiritual form that is radically disconnected from their present mode of existence. Others do believe that they will one day have bodies again and those who embrace some form of premillennialism (the idea that Jesus will return and will set up His kingdom in Jerusalem) further believe that they will reign with Christ in those bodies on the earth during the millennium. But once the thousand years are up, it's off again to heaven for good. In all this there is the leaven of dualism that has more in common with Plato than Jesus, Paul and the Jewish belief about the nature of both the resurrection and God's purpose for the earth.

In direct opposition to gnosticism, the Bible declares that God created the physical world and called it "very good." (Gen. 1:31) He then placed man in charge of His creation, to protect and cultivate the planet; adapting Kant's terminology: to fashion it, the phenomenal world, after the pattern of the noumenal world (heaven). And even though Adam and Eve grossly failed at their prime directive and thus subjected the cosmos to futility (Rom. 8:20), God immediately set out to make things right again. His plan, predetermined before the cosmos was spoken into being, found its crescendo through God the Son's incarnation, cross and subsequent enthronement as the absolute LORD of heaven and earth. An important truth that needs to be emphasized here in relation to our topic: this Jesus who now sits at the right hand of God (Psalm 110, Daniel 7: 13,14) does so not as He was *before* the incarnation – as pure Spirit like His Father – *but as a*

*Man*, the first-born of a new creation that so fulfills the promise of the old that Paul declares it to be “all creation.” (Col 1:15) And so He will ever be, an ineffably glorified, transfigured Man to be sure, but a Man nonetheless.

And – are you ready for this? – as He now is, so we, who belong to Christ, will one day be. (1 John 3:2) The implication of all this relative to the virus of gnosticism? God’s purpose for our bodies is not for us to escape them but rather that He will transform them; to resurrect, transfigure and glorify them. *For as He is, so shall we one day be.* That doesn’t mean we will become as God, the fourth persons of a new “Quadrinity.” But we will share in His glory to such a degree that, as C.S. Lewis noted in his famous sermon “The Weight of Glory,” if we could see our “dullest and most uninteresting” Christian neighbor as he will one day be, we would be “strongly tempted to worship” him. And collectively, the “myriads of myriads” (Rev. 5:11) of the redeemed that make up the Church Triumphant will have a collective glory that will make her a suitable Bride for the Son. Jesus isn’t marrying down.

But it goes even further and deeper than that. In the same way that God’s purposes for our bodies is to resurrect, transfigure and glorify them – so are His purposes for our planet. Earth will not be *destroyed* by the final universal flood, the fiery conflagration that will occur at the end of days rather than the waters God used in Noah’s time. (Gen. 9:11,15; 2 Pet. 3:1-13) Rather the earth will be purged and all sin and every thing that falls short of the glory of God will be finally and permanently removed. A new heavens and earth will emerge (Isa. 66: 22; 2 Peter 3:13b): transformed, transfigured, glorified, eternal – as different from this present cosmos as Jesus’ resurrected body was from the one that died on the cross<sup>1</sup> – and yet just as similar, just as recognizable, *just as real*. In fact, as C.S. Lewis’ often suggested with the wonderful imagery of the *shadowlands*, the parallel universe of *Narnia*, and the heaven/hell dichotomy in *The Great Divorce*, the Final Estate is even more solid, real, and super-sensory than our present reality. (As real as this present reality nevertheless remains; no neo-platonic/gnostic viruses allowed!) It is the Ultimate Reality, the *All Creation* that reaches out of the eternal into the now and, like an infinitely powerful Attractor, pulls everything into “the one divine event towards which all creation moves.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> There is great mystery here (1 Cor. 2:9) and throughout this paragraph and we need to be careful not to surmise more than scripture reveals. But the Bible does seem to hint at ways Jesus’ resurrected body was different from His former one: apparently it could pass through walls (John 20:19) and also suddenly vanish (Luke 24:31b); appear unrecognizable and/or very different (John 20: 14, 15 – though this could just be an instance, as is more strongly suggested by Cleopas’ inability to recognize his beloved rabbi (Luke 24:16) of a form of divinely-induced myopia; Rev. 1:12-16); and “teleport” from our four-dimensional world into the higher-dimensional reality in which the divine throne-room presently exists. (Dan. 7:13; Mark 16:19) And yet, with all these differences, Jesus was not what we would term a ghost or the disembodied, pure Spirit embraced by the Gnostics as the ideal state. He had a body that could be felt and, for example, could eat real food. (see Luke 24: 36-43 for a concise synopsis of both sides of this proverbial coin.)

<sup>2</sup> Alfred Tennyson, *In Memoriam A.H.H.* Tennyson also describes this event as “far-off.” That may well be true as far as human time is concerned; there is likely much left to be done for the Bride to be made ready. And yet there is another sense in which it may be quite near. The membrane between heaven and earth might very well be far thinner than most would believe.

...the mystery of His will, according to His purpose, which He set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in Him, things in heaven and things on earth. **Ephesians 1:9.10**

As Christians, born-again from the "above" that is the throne-room of God, we have already tasted of this heavenly gift (Heb. 6:4), this final reality.<sup>3</sup> We have become "partakers of the divine nature." (2 Pet. 1:4) It is thus our task – and great joy – to bring what will be into the now; to live, in the manner of our King, *incarnationally*, seeking to see *God's Kingdom come and His will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*<sup>4</sup>

The ultimate purpose of creation is the fashioning of a Bride for the Son. To this end, there is a sense in which the earth is the Bride's *trousseau*. As Christians we are not to look to escape the earth – but rather re-shape it. Just as the Bride is to "make herself ready" for the marriage of the Lamb (Rev. 19:7), so we must seek to fulfill the Genesis Mandate as stated and then restated by our Creator – the One who breathed into Adam's body the breath/Spirit of life and later re-animated the first members of His new creation with the same breath (John 20:22): to go into all the earth and strive to replenish it and bring it into subjection to God's order (Gen. 1:28, Matt. 28: 18-20); to "seek *first* the Kingdom of God and His righteousness." (Matt. 6:33) Because of the pernicious virus of gnosticism/dualism, many Christians reduce this prime directive to just some form of personal piety, or worse, to a future eternal estate. But make no mistake about it: God's kingdom and His righteousness manifest *on earth as they are in heaven* wherever and whenever He and His standards rule. They are to be just as real, just as healing and transformative, just as relevant to this present world as Jesus' incarnation was.<sup>5</sup>

The endgame of the mystery we call life is well under way. Millions of His elect people have already been united with Him through the new birth. Those numbers are being added to daily. Slowly, incrementally and usually through great tribulation the world around these Christians during their sojourn has also experienced a measure of transformation. God's enemies – injustice, sickness, fear, despair, unbelief, autonomy, etcetera – are haltingly being made as footstools for His feet. For sure there are ebbs and flows to the inexorable growth of the Kingdom's leaven in the loaf of this world. (Matt. 13:33) The West, in particular, seems to be in the throes of just such a diminishing. But times of refreshing inevitably come – sometimes after a nation or

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<sup>3</sup> And we taste again and are refreshed every time we take communion in faith. The Eucharist is not *just* a symbol or a memorial.

<sup>4</sup> Obviously we are first to pray this, just as Jesus taught us to. (Matt. 6:10) But that necessarily leads us to two other things. First, we are to believe that this can *and will* happen; that God would never ask us to pray in futility, for things that can't possibly happen. Second, we are to get with God's program and do our part to see that it happens. (Acts 13:36) In the very next line of the His Prayer, Jesus tells to also pray for our daily bread. Does anyone think that after praying this we're supposed to idly sit by and wait for it to fall from the sky? Or to contentedly starve to death so that we can eat the food – and enjoy the righteousness – that only belong to us in heaven? (2 Thess. 3:10)

<sup>5</sup> The degree to which our present world will be "heavenized" before the Lord's return is a subject of much debate. Ultimately only God knows. But we do know that it is by faith we see will see the mountains of this fallen world system – whether in our individual lives or throughout the nations – cast down. (Matt. 17:20) How many of us are believing God for a lousy, sin-stained, defeated life? Why not believe that we can overcome; that the One with and in us is greater than the one that is in the world? (1 John 4:4)

empire has been judged and destroyed. The Kingdom ever advances. The strong man's house is plundered and in and through that plundering the Bride – and this world – are being made ready.

One day the Son will return for both. (Luke 19:11-27) He will catch the Bride up to Himself, completing the process of transformation that began with election, adoption and regeneration. She will be changed; in a moment and in the twinkling of an eye she will become fully like Him, recreated into His exact image. (1 Cor. 15:52; 1 John 3:2) And with that final, glorious transfiguration, the last enemy, death, will be forever vanquished. (1 Cor. 15:26) He will then bring her back down to the garden planet that was created to be her home. The present heavens and earth will kiss, become one and a whole new æon will emerge from the glorious fire sparked by their union. (2 Pet. 3:11-13) To the Apostle John's eyes all this looked as a New Jerusalem – the holy city built by God (Heb. 11:10), a temple that Moses served, but that Jesus built (Heb. 3:1-6) using redeemed people as living stones (Heb. 3:6b; 1 Pet. 2:5; 1 Cor. 3:16) – coming down out of heaven as a bride.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. **Rev. 21: 1-3**

This is the *eschaton* that we must believe, embrace and work towards. It is, in a sense, the very reason for our existence and once grasped – or perhaps it is better to say once you have been grasped by it – everything about your life will change.<sup>6</sup> After Paul prayed that the Holy Spirit would grant God's people the "eyes" to see it (Eph. 1:17-23) and then outlined what it looked like and how it would all end (1 Cor. 15:12-56), he then went on to encourage us – not sit back and wait for the inevitable – but to instead:

...be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain. **1 Cor. 15:58**

Note that our "labor is not in vain." We should believe that God's enemies can be placed under His and our feet, that truth really is more powerful than lies.

In the same way Peter, after putting his spin on the same horizon point, encourages us:

...since all things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God. **2 Pet. 3:11**

How are we to hasten the coming of that glorious day? The same way Noah did in his epoch. By building the ark; working with God to win His elect and prepare both the

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<sup>6</sup> OK, I know that the Westminster Catechism says that the chief end of man is to know God and enjoy Him for ever. Read the verse I just quoted again. (Rev. 21:1-3) This is just another way of saying the same thing – just more specific and practical.

Bride and her trousseau for the Lord's return. By occupying or doing the business of the Kingdom until the King returns. (Micah 6:6,8)

We thank God for the heaven as it presently is: a place of rest and worship for the Church Triumphant. We thank Him that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.<sup>7</sup> (2 Cor. 5:8) But we also thank Him that heaven is not the end of this world. He is. And a *new* heavens and a *new* earth will be the home that we – the resurrected, transfigured saints of God – will eternally share with Him.

We began with a popular song that sadly misses this great truth. Let's end with one that gets it exactly right:

*This is my Father's world, Oh let me ne'er forget  
That though the wrong seems oft so strong  
God is the Ruler yet*

*This is my Father's world, the battle is not done  
Jesus who died shall be satisfied  
And earth and heaven be one*

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

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<sup>7</sup> It is interesting and perhaps significant how little the Bible tells us about the state between the Christian's death and bodily resurrection. Perhaps the Lord doesn't want us to obsess over that stage in that it is only temporary.