

The Eternal State. Maidenhead. 14 March 2009.

As you know, the subject announced for this evening is that of 'The Eternal State'.¹ And our reading for this evening comes from Revelation chapter 21 verses 1 to 8.

[Revelation 21. 1-8.]

And, for the most part, I intend to concentrate on these eight verses – because, as far as I know, this is the only biblical passage which deals in any detail with that which the notice card titles 'The Eternal State'.

As you know, the Book of Revelation abounds in word pictures, images and symbols. And I would be the first to acknowledge that there is often more than one way of interpreting these – and that many godly and scholarly Bible teachers have differed – and still do differ – and differ quite radically – in how they understand many of the details

So I want to make it clear at the outset, that what I have to say this evening represents at best my opinion – what to me is the most satisfactory interpretation of the Bible text – and that I have neither wish nor right to be dogmatic on many of the points.

But, before we look at our passage, I have some ground to clear. First of all, we need to ask what we mean by the word 'eternal'.

And second, I shall need to say just a little about two other passages; namely a few verses in 2 Peter 3, and the lengthy section which stretches from Revelation 21 verse 9 through to chapter 22 verse 5.

First then, what do we mean by the word 'eternal'?

Are we to understand 'eternity' simply as that which is endless, or as that which is, in fact, timeless?

I know of no statement of scripture which decides the matter one way or the other. But I should perhaps comment briefly on two verses of scripture – one in the Old Testament and one in the New – to which some have appealed for proof that the eternal state will be a timeless existence.

First, there is the description given by the prophet Isaiah in chapter 57 of his book of God as 'the High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity'.² But, in fact, the Hebrew word translated 'eternity' in itself means simply 'for a duration', 'indefinitely', and, personally, I don't understand the verse as claiming that 'eternity' is a state or condition where God 'dwells',³ – but rather as portraying Him as 'the continually dwelling One' – in the context, the eternally dwelling One' – that He is the One who 'dwells' (who lives, that is) for ever. But no more than that.

The second verse comes from Revelation chapter 10, verse six of which speaks of an angel who 'lifted up his hand to heaven, and swore by him that liveth for ever and ever ... that there should be time no longer' – so reads the KJV. But the verse isn't announcing the abolition of 'time' – the angel is simply saying that there will no longer be any delay – and that is how his words should be translated.⁴ The angel's point being that, though in longsuffering, God had long suspended His judgement on evil, the time had now come for God to intervene – a meaning made clear because, following the fulfilment of the angel's word, there will be at least another 1,000 years before the present heavens and earth pass away.⁵

I leave philosophers to dispute the nature of the eternal state. I know that Plato, for example, insisted that eternity transcends time and is time-less, whereas Aristotle taught that eternity is simply time without limit – that it is, not timeless, but end-less. But I know of *no scripture* which says the one or the other.⁶

Whichever is right, for my part I cannot even begin to grasp the idea of eternity. But then neither can I comprehend what 'time' there was *before* the creation of the existing heavens and earth – 'before the foundation of the world' – if 'time' there was at all ... when there was nothing – no light, no cosmos – nothing! From scripture, I know only that the Father and the Son shared the same glory, that the Father loved the Son, that the Lamb was foreknown, and that we were chosen in Him that we should be holy and blameless.⁷

And, frankly, I cannot conceive how things will be after the existing heavens and earth are brought to an end.⁸ What I do know is that scripture wants me to contrast – not the concepts of time and of eternity – but those things which are temporal and those things which are eternal – and to live in the light of the latter! I am happy to leave speculation to the philosophers.

Next Saturday it will be 261 years to the day since John Newton, the 18th century converted slave trader and hymn writer, was converted.⁹ I guess that Mr. Newton's most famous hymn is the one known to us as 'Amazing Grace'.¹⁰ And I happily sing his verse, 'When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun, we've no less

days to sing God's praise than when we'd first begun' – even though, as I see it, Mr. Newton chose to sit on the proverbial fence – on the one hand speaking of '10,000 years' and on the other assuring us of having 'no less days' left when the 10,000 years had passed! But I know what he meant.

A comment or two then about verses 7 to 13 of 2 Peter 3.

Verse 12 is the only place in our Bibles where we find the expression 'day of God'. Some have pointed to the literal translation of verse 12, which speaks of 'the day of God, by reason of which (on account of which), the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved', and have understood this as meaning that the physical heavens and earth will pass away 'with view to' the coming of the day of God, that is, they take the expression 'day of God' as a title for the eternal state.

I have no wish to be dogmatic, but I think the context points rather to heavens and earth passing away *because* (and not *before*) the day of God has arrived – in other words, that it is the coming of the day of God which *causes* the burning, dissolving and melting of the elements of the heavens and earth – and so, for what it is worth, I take the expression 'day of God' as the equivalent of the 'day of Lord' – an expression, as I am sure you have learned during your studies, which spans the whole period of God's direct intervention and judgement – extending from the time the Lamb first takes the seven-sealed scroll, through the time of the Tribulation, the Millennium and the final apostasy, to the judgement of the Great White Throne and the 'passing away' and the 'dissolving' of all things.¹¹

But what *are* we to understand by the 'passing away' of the heavens and earth – as noted by both Peter and John?¹² Or by the heavens and earth being 'dissolved' and 'melting' with fervent heat, 2 Pet. 3. 10, 12; or of them 'perishing', being 'rolled up' and 'changed', Heb. 1. 11-12; or of them being 'shaken' and 'removed', Heb. 12. 26-27; or of them 'fleeing away', Rev. 20. 11?

The overall impression I get is that the heavens and earth will be renewed and remade, rather than be utterly destroyed and annihilated – with replacement heavens and earth ten being created out of nothing. But I could be wrong! It has been known.

But what of Revelation 21. 9 to 22. 5?

Well, from what I can tell, Bible students and commentators are fairly evenly divided between (a) those who see the fulfilment of this lengthy section as following directly on from what is revealed in verses 1 to 8 – that is, that the whole of chapter 21 and a good bit of chapter 22 speak of what we have labelled 'the eternal state' – and (b) those who see the fulfilment of this section as taking place during the Millennium – that is, who believe that from verse 9 we are thrown back to the period mentioned briefly in the opening of chapter 20.

Personally, I tend towards the latter view – namely in seeing Revelation 21. 9 to 22. 5 as referring to the role of the New Jerusalem in our Lord's Millennial kingdom. We clearly don't have the time for me to explain my reasons in full, but I am swayed by two main considerations :

First, by the knowledge that there are several other occasions in the Book of Revelation when John doubles back on himself and covers the same period for a second time – either from an entirely different standpoint or to fill in further details.

For example, it seems to me that the closing section of chapter 11 – from verse 15 to verse 18 – marks the end of one main section of the book, when the seventh angel sounds his trumpet and loud voices are heard in heaven, declaring that, 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign for ever and ever. And the twenty-four elders ... fell on their faces and worshipped God, saying, We give you thanks, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign'. As I see it, the following main section of the book focuses on the leading actors in the drama – ranging from the dragon, the Beast, the False Prophet and Great Babylon (the Mother of Harlots), to the person of our Lord Jesus Himself.

And even *within* this latter section John, having referred to the fall of Babylon briefly in verse 8 of chapter 14 ('another angel ... followed, saying, 'Fallen, fallen is Babylon the Great') returned later (in the long section from the beginning of chapter 17 to the opening verses of chapter 19) to fill in the details of Babylon's destruction, together with the responses of both earth and heaven to her fall.

And as I see it, the section from verse 9 of chapter 21 down throws us back – not to the verses immediately before – but to the glories of the New Jerusalem during the millennial reign of Christ of which we read about first at the end of chapter 11 and then touch on briefly at the opening of chapter 20.¹³

My second reason for linking the section with the millennial kingdom stems from some of the details given of 'the holy city Jerusalem' of verse 9 and onwards which I find difficult to reconcile with the eternal state.

As I understand it, speaking generally, distinctions formed since the foundation of the world – such as national distinctions and distinctions of rank among men – will cease when the present world does. Yet in the latter part of chapter 21 we read, for example, of the 12 tribes of Israel, v. 12, of the kings of the earth, v. 24, and of nations, vv. 24, 26 – whereas the only distinction in the first eight verses consists in that between the New Jerusalem (the church having been in view since before the foundation of the world) and ‘men’. Again, I find it difficult to see the need for ‘healing’ in any form – whether physically or spiritually – in eternity ... yet we read in the second verse of chapter 22 that ‘the leaves of the tree’ of life are ‘for the healing of the nations. Nor, with my eye on the same verse, am I convinced that it makes sense to speak of the twelve ‘months’ of the year in eternity either.¹⁴

If I am right then, the New Jerusalem is seen descending out of heaven from God twice – once, according to verse 10, at the beginning of the Millennium, and once, according to verse 2, after its close.¹⁵ The second descent being necessary for the obvious reason that the first heaven and earth will then have ‘passed away’ and there will be new heavens and a new earth.

Turning then to the opening of Revelation 21.¹⁶

I take the reference to ‘no more sea’ in verse 1 to be literal. Indeed, as I see it, some such reference was needed to round off the section John began at the end of chapter 20. First, he told us : (a) that the earth and the heaven scuttled away from the face of the Judge, 20. 11, (b) that ‘the sea gave up the dead that were in it’, v. 13, and (c) that ‘Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them’, v. 13. Note the references to the heavens and the earth, to Death and Hades and to the sea. Then we read of the destiny of Death and Hades and of heaven and earth; namely that ‘Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire’, v. 14, and that the first heaven and first earth passed away, 21. 1. But what of ‘the sea’? Ah, John notes, on the *new* earth there won’t be any.

And I guess that the absence of any sea was particularly precious to the man who was at that moment exiled, ‘in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ’, Rev. 1. 9.

But although John begins with a reference to the new heavens and new earth, his chief interest doesn’t lie there. The new heavens and new earth merely provide the backdrop for the New Jerusalem, which now takes centre stage.

As you no doubt know, the closing chapters of the book of Revelation are largely dominated by detailed accounts of two ‘great’ cities : first the city of Babylon – described as ‘great’ no less than 12 times between chapters 14 and 19¹⁷ – and second ‘the holy city’, the New Jerusalem – described as ‘great’ just once, in chapter 21 verse 10.

In one sense, therefore, I guess you might say that, to borrow a book title from Charles Dickens, these chapters tell ‘A Tale of Two Cities’.

And, just as the worldly system (Babylon) is portrayed both as a city and a woman, so too the heavenly company (the New Jerusalem) is also portrayed both as a city and a woman.¹⁸ For the New Jerusalem is not only seen ‘adorned as a bride for her husband in verse 2; she is spoken of as *‘the Bride’* – ‘the wife of the Lamb’ – in verse 9.

And although, as you know, John makes no explicit mention of the church – or indeed of any churches – between chapter 3 and verse 16 of chapter 22.¹⁹ we have no real doubt as to the identity of this ‘bride’ – not least because of Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 11, ‘I am jealous over you with a God-like jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste (‘a pure’) virgin to Christ’, 2 Cor. 11. 2.

And it is wonderful to discover that, although both the marriage and the marriage supper took place some 1,000 years before,²⁰ the New Jerusalem is still described as a bride arrayed in her bridal gown – indicating, I suspect, the eternally fresh and intimate relationship between Christ and His Church.

And, inasmuch as the bride is clearly one and the same as the city, Rev. 21. 2, 9-10, we, the saints, *are* the New Jerusalem.

And yet we are plainly told in verse 7 that ‘he who overcomes shall inherit these things’. And the following chapter also seems to distinguish clearly between the city and God’s people. So that, for example, verse 3 says, ‘the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in *it*; and *His servants* shall serve Him: and *they* shall see His face’.²¹ Again, I think of the words of the writer to the Hebrews...**PP**...; ‘here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come’, Heb. 13. 14.

So, *are* we the city or will we *be in* the city? I suggest that, paradoxically, the answer is ‘Yes’ to both. Not that this is a problem in a book abounding with symbolism and imagery – in which we read for instance of the Lion who is the Lamb!

Personally, I take the 'tabernacle of God' of verse 3 to be the New Jerusalem itself – where God abides and dwells in a special sense – 'tabernacling' on the new earth with men – with those who remain faithful to God on earth throughout and at the close of the millennial kingdom – through the New Jerusalem.

And, if I am right, the same man, John, who told us in the opening section of his Gospel that 'the Word' who 'was God' Himself 'became flesh and dwelt ('tabernacled') among men on the present earth, John 1. 14 ... that same man now tells us towards the close of his Revelation that God will 'tabernacle' with men on the new earth through us!²²

As far as I know, verses 5 to 8 is one of only two sections in the Book of Revelation where God is heard to speak directly. The other is back in chapter 1, verse 8: 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty'.

And here again it is the Alpha and the Omega who, not only declares that He makes all things new, v. 5, but who adds His exclamation, 'It is done', v. 6 ... using the same word we find in chapter 16 verse 17, when a loud voice announced from the throne, 'It is done' in connection with the final phase of God's judgement and wrath. But here God Himself announces the completion of, what we might call, the new creation.²³

And those words 'It is done' must surely remind us of the victorious cry of our Lord Jesus from His cross, where He secured for His people a place in that new creation ... 'It is finished', John 19. 30.²⁴

We can hardly miss that the description which John gives of the eternal world and of the New Jerusalem is largely negative – and necessarily so. For we do not possess the faculties, the apparatus, the equipment to enable us to grasp what it really *is* going to be like.²⁵

Although, in my opinion, the description of the New Jerusalem in the later long section – from verse 9 onwards – relates to its function in our Lord's millennial kingdom, clearly it is the same company of saints who are in view. And I note that this later section adds two more negative features; namely, in chapter 22 verse 3 that 'there shall be no more curse', and in verse 5 (repeated from verse 25 of our chapter) that 'there will be no more night'.

Taking these statements with those of verse 4, we discover that there are six experiences which will never be encountered by anyone who has part in the New Jerusalem²⁶ ... 'there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain (literally 'there shall be no more pain')', Rev. 21. 4; 'there shall be no more *curse*', 22. 3, and 'there shall be no night there (literally, 'there shall be no more *night*')', 22. 5. That is, there shall be 'no more death, sorrow, crying, pain, curse or night'.

You will probably be aware from your earlier studies that the Book of the Revelation makes reference to two Jerusalems, not only to that which the apostle Paul terms the 'Jerusalem which is above', but also to that which he terms the 'Jerusalem which now is', Gal. 4. 25-26.

Although, interestingly, John does not call the earthly Jerusalem by its name²⁷ – reserving the name 'Jerusalem' for the *New Jerusalem* (the 'Revised Version') – both in the promise to the overcomers in the church at Philadelphia, Rev. 3. 12, and here in chapter 21 (verses 2 and 10). The apostle describes the *earthly* Jerusalem as 'the great city which spiritually is called Sodom (the place notorious in scripture for filth and corruption) and Egypt (the place notorious for opposition and persecution), where also our Lord was crucified', Rev. 11. 8. We know then that John is referring to Jerusalem, because the city is clearly identified as the place where the Lord Jesus was 'crucified'.

And the fact that He was crucified there suggests many ideas to me. First, and put at its simplest, I might say that *the Lord Jesus went once to the Jerusalem which now is – to the earthly Jerusalem – that I might go forever to the Jerusalem which is above* – that I might have a part and a place in the heavenly Jerusalem. More accurately – more precisely – I should say that *He went once to a 'place' just outside the Jerusalem which now is – that I might have a 'place' forever inside the New Jerusalem*. We read that Jesus 'bearing His cross, went out (went out of the city, that is) to a place called "of a Skull", which is called in Hebrew, Golgotha, where they crucified Him', John 19. 17-18. And, again, that 'Pilate wrote a title and put it on the cross ... Many of the Jews read this title, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city', John 19. 19-20.²⁸ I think of the opening words of Mrs. Alexander's great Easter hymn, 'There is a green hill far away, without (being old English for 'outside') a city wall'.

So the Lord Jesus went to a place a little way outside the Jerusalem which now is. But, because of what He suffered there, He has secured for me a place inside the Jerusalem which is above.

We are all familiar with His soul-stirring words in John 14, 'In my Father's house are many mansions (many dwelling places; many abodes); if it were not so, I would have told you. For I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to myself; that where I am, there you may be also', John 14. 2-3. So, if we read of a 'place' twice in John 19, we do also in John 14.²⁹

And I want you to think with me of a series of contrasts between what *the Lord Jesus* experienced at the Jerusalem which *now is* and what we who believe in Him will experience in the Jerusalem which *is above* – or, more accurately, what we will *not* experience there.

There shall be no more death. Our destiny lies in a deathless city – a city with no obituary notices, no funeral homes and no cemeteries. *But what did the earthly Jerusalem hold for the Son of man?* Listen to the words of our Lord in Matthew 16; ‘From that time, Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be *killed*’, Matt. 16. 21.³⁰ Again, listen to our Lord’s words in John 12, when He had just entered Jerusalem; ‘I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all to myself. This He said, signifying by what *death* He would die’, John 12. 32-33.

Oh yes, the Son of man knew all about death!

There shall be no more sorrow. *But what did the earthly Jerusalem hold for the Son of man?* Well did Isaiah predict, ‘He is despised and rejected by men, a *man of sorrows* and acquainted with grief’, Isa. 53. 3. In Gethsemane, great storm clouds of anticipation burst in fury over His head – ‘He took with Him’, Matthew tells us, ‘Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and He began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed. Then He said to them, My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death’, Matt. 26. 37-38. Three days before, He had said, ‘Now is my soul troubled’, John 12. 27. But now ‘My soul is exceedingly sorrowful’ – is sad all around – is wrapped about with sorrow – immersed in one vast ocean of grief. Well did Philip Bliss exclaim in his great hymn, ‘Man of sorrows! What a name for the Son of God who came ...’³¹

Oh yes, the Son of man knew all about sorrow!

There shall be no more crying. *But what did the earthly Jerusalem hold for the Son of man?* The word John used in Rev. 21, translated ‘crying’, does not mean weeping and tears. Although our Lord was, of course, no stranger to tears. We might think of His weeping in connection with the *Jerusalem* which now is³² – or in connection with *the death of Lazarus*.³³ But I note that His ‘crying’ is clearly distinguished from His tears in Heb. 5. 7 – ‘Who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications (petitions), with strong (with vehement) *crying* and *tears* to Him who was able to save Him from (‘out of’) death ...’³⁴ The word John uses here in Rev. 21. 4 – and which the writer to the Hebrews uses in chapter 5 verse 7 – means to ‘utter a cry, to cry out’.

We find that, *in Gethsemane*, the Lord Jesus cried out, ‘My Father³⁵, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me’ – as He recoiled from what that cup contained for Him, Matt. 26. 39. And we read that, *at the cross*, ‘about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is, My God, My God, why did you forsake me?’, v. 46. And so we find that He cried ‘My Father’ in Gethsemane and ‘My God’ at Golgotha.

Oh yes, the Son of man knew all about crying!

There shall be no more pain. *But what did the earthly Jerusalem hold for the Son of man?* Again, I hear the words of Mrs. Alexander’s hymn, ‘We may not know; we cannot tell what *pains* He had to bear’. Just think of what the Lord Jesus endured on the physical, human level before *Caiaphas* – when the Men of the Council ‘spat in His face and buffeted Him (‘they struck Him with their fists’); and they slapped Him, saying, Prophecy to us, Christ! Who is it that struck you?’³⁶ And, make no mistake, He felt their blows keenly.

And think of what He endured before *Pilate* – of the pain He suffered from the crown of thorns, pounded down on to His head by the reed-sceptre, earlier thrust into His right hand – think of the pain He suffered from the murderous scourge – which left His back a mass of bleeding flesh. And remember that He had earlier refused the drugged wine (‘mingled with gall’) which had been offered to Him, and which would have gone at least some way to deaden His pain, Matt. 27. 34. And what of the spikes which men smashed through His hands and feet? Do you think He didn’t feel them? And yet all these were as nothing compared with the wrath and judgement of God He endured when He bore my sins – when He suffered, not *from* men, but *for* men ... for you and me.

Oh yes, the Son of man knew all about pain!

There shall be no more curse. Interestingly, the word ‘curse’ is the very last word of the *Old Testament* – in both English and Hebrew – ‘He (the ‘Elijah’ who would come) will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a curse’, Mal. 4. 6.³⁷

But God would not sign off the *New Testament* until He had given His people the assurance that the day would come when there would ‘be no more curse’. *But what did the earthly Jerusalem hold for the Son of man?* Listen to Paul in Galatians 3; ‘As many as are of the works of the law are under the curse’, but ‘Christ’, Paul continued, ‘has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us, for it is written, Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’.³⁸

Moses once reminded Israel of the time the Moabites – and I quote him – ‘hired against you Balaam the son of Beor ... to curse you’. ‘But the Lord your God’, Moses added, ‘would not listen to Balaam, and the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God loved you’, Deut. 23. 4-5; cf. Neh. 13. 2. And the Lord Jesus has done just that for us Gentiles – because He loved us, He has turned the curse into a blessing – but only at the cost of Himself becoming a curse for us.

Oh yes, the Son of man knew all about being made a curse.

And finally, **there shall be no more night**. I read once that this text was inscribed on the tombstone of a young blind Christian girl. Clearly it held great significance for the young girl’s parents. And certainly there will be no night – or blind eyes – in the New Jerusalem. *But what did the earthly Jerusalem hold for the Son of man? We know well the words of Mark 15: ‘When the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour’, Mark 15. 33. As the old hymn says, ‘But none of the ransomed ever knew how deep were the waters crossed; nor how dark was the night that the Lord passed through ere He found His sheep that was lost’.*³⁹

Oh yes, the Son of man knew all about being plunged into the deepest darkness – as He bore my sins.

Remember then that the Lord Jesus went once to the ‘place’ where He faced and endured ... death, sorrow, crying, pain, the curse and night ... that we might dwell forever in the ‘place’ where none of these things will ever be found!

What a *tremendous* price Jesus paid. His riches turned into poverty; His glory into shame; His bliss into suffering; His throne into a cross. And all that I might dwell forever in that place where no death, sorrow, crying, pain, curse or night will ever enter.

In conclusion, we must never let the things we don’t understand rob us of the enjoyment of that which we do. And the little which scripture does reveal of the eternal state positively bristles with comfort and encouragement. And we know that our future glorious inheritance will more than compensate for any amount of suffering, trouble or trial we may be called on to face now. Let’s hear you say it, Paul ... ‘Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us *a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory*, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For *the things which are seen are temporary*, but *the things which are not seen are eternal*, 2 Cor. 4. 17-18.’⁴⁰

Endnotes

¹ I recall the words of Mark Twain, referring to a question he had once been asked, 'I was gratified to be able to answer promptly, and I did. I said I didn't know'. As you will discover this evening, I have a lot in common with Mr Twain!

² Isaiah 57. 15.

³ The word 'ad' (x 49) denotes the unforeseeable future, TWOT, number 1565. It is used for the past on two occasions, 'Knowest thou not this of old (ad), since man was placed upon earth', Job 20. 4 ('of old', since man was placed upon earth); Hab. 3. 6 (everlasting mountains). See Psalm 119. 44, 'So shall I keep thy law continually for ever and ever'. 'Ad' is often found in combination with *olam*; 'forever and ever'; Exod. 15. 18; Mic. 4. 5; Psa. 9. 5; 48. 14; 145. 1-2.

⁴ 'He swore ... that there should be no more delay'.

⁵ See James Barr, *Biblical Words for Time*, page 76, footnote 2. I am well aware that the literal translation of the New Testament expression 'for ever' is 'to the age', (occurring 40 times) and that of 'for ever and ever' is 'to the age(s) of the age(s)'. (Occurring nine times : Phil. 4. 20; 1 Tim. 1. 17; 2 Tim. 4. 18; Heb. 1. 8; 1 Pet. 4. 11; 5. 11; Rev. 1. 6; 4. 9, 10.) But we must be careful not read *too much* into the use of the word 'age' or 'ages' in these expressions. For these expressions did – and do – mean simply 'for ever' – and do not necessarily carry the idea of an infinite number of 'ages'. I note that the literal translation of the doxology at the close of Eph. 3 reads 'Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations of the age of ages'. This *may*, I put it no higher, suggest eternity consists of unending ages rather than a timeless state – if we accept Paul is referring eternity. I am far from certain how many verses or expressions in my Bible are related to the subject. We do know that the expression 'for ever' etc must be interpreted in the light of context and subject matter and certainly doesn't always mean 'for eternity'.⁵ For example, I read in Exodus 21 of the Hebrew servant - 'his master shall bore his ear through with an aul; and he shall serve him for ever', v. 6, and of Onesimus in Philemon 15, "perhaps he therefore departed *for a season* (an hour), that thou shouldst receive him *for ever* (eternally)" – in both cases clearly referring only to the end of a person's life. As said earlier, 'literal translation of 'for ever' is 'to the age". And I note that Peter used the expression in John 13 - 'Peter saith unto him, Thou shalt never (to the age) wash my feet', John 13. 8 – and Paul at the end of 1 Cor. 8 ; 'if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth (to the age), lest I make my brother to offend', v. 13. In itself, the expression simply points to the indefinite future. Only the context in which the words are found can determine whether or not they refer to eternity. So really is no need to bite your fingernails if read of 'everlasting hills', Gen. 49. 26, or that earth shall 'not be removed for ever', Psa. 104. 5, or, for that matter, that Gabriel should tell Mary concerning the Lord Jesus that 'he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever', Luke 1. 33. In itself, the expression simply points to the indefinite future. Only the context can determine its meaning in any particular instance.

⁶ To speak of God's eternity as an eternal Now - a present in the time-sense - involves a contradiction. For the eternal existence is no more described by the notion of a present than by a past or a future.

⁷ John 17. 5, 24; 1 Pet. 1. 19-20; Eph. 1. 4.

⁸ Edwin A. Abbott, in his classic Victorian fantasy, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* (1884), wrote of a two-dimensional world (Flatland) in which women were lines, working-class men were triangles, professional men were squares and priests were circles. The hero, "A Square," has a mystical experience in which a spherical Stranger ushers him into "the Land of Three Dimensions," transforming his flat world forever (Abbott 1952:80). John too looks into a city far beyond his comprehension or powers of description. See Wilder-Smith, *Basis for New Biology*, pages 162-177.

⁹ 1725-1807. Converted March 21st 1748.

¹⁰ Amazing grace! How sweet the sound

That saved a wretch like me!

I once was lost, but now am found;

Was blind, but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,

And grace my fears relieved;

How precious did that grace appear

The hour I first believed!

Through many dangers, toils and snares,

I have already come;

'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,

And grace will lead me home.

The Lord has promised good to me,

His Word my hope secures;

He will my Shield and Portion be,

As long as life endures.

Yea, when this flesh and heart shall fail,

And mortal life shall cease,

I shall possess, within the veil,
A life of joy and peace.

The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,
The sun forbear to shine;
But God, who called me here below,
Will be forever mine.

When we've been there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we'd first begun.

¹¹ I note that there are other variations to the expression 'day of the Lord' in both Old and New Testaments – we read of 'the day of the Lord God of hosts ('the Lord Jehovah of hosts), a day of vengeance, that he may avenge him of his adversaries', Jer. 46. 10, and of 'spirits of demons' which gather kings of earth 'to the battle of that great day of God Almighty', Rev. 16. 14.

¹² 2 Pet. 3. 10; Rev. 21. 1 – using different Greek words.

¹³ And I note also the recurring clause, 'And I saw'. We find this expression thirty-three times in all in the book, twenty-three of which come between the beginning of chapter 5 and the end of chapter 16 – spanning the seven seals, the seven trumpets and the seven bowls. The expression then occurs just twice at the opening of chapter 17 (verses 3 and 6). And we do not meet it again until the series of nine occasions which we read earlier – stretching, without any obvious break as I see it, from chapter 19 verse 11 to the beginning of chapter 21 :

(a) The first mention covers Scene 1 (the Warrior-King riding out of heaven); 'And I saw the heaven opened', Rev. 19. 11.

(b) The second and third cover Scene 2 (the 'war' between the Lamb and His foes); 'And I saw an angel standing in the sun', Rev. 19. 17, together with 'And I saw the beast', Rev. 19. 19.

(c) The fourth and fifth cover Scene 3 (the capture and imprisonment of the dragon, and the Messianic reign), 'And I saw an angel coming down from heaven', Rev. 20. 1, together with 'And I saw thrones', Rev. 20. 4.

(d) The six and seventh cover Scene 4 (the Supreme Court of Divine Justice): 'And I saw a great white throne', Rev. 20. 11, together with 'And I saw the dead', Rev. 20. 12.

(e) And, finally, the eighth and ninth occasions cover Scene 5 (the New Heavens and Earth); 'And I saw a new heaven and a new earth', Rev. 21. 1, together with, 'And I saw the holy city', Rev. 21. 2.

¹⁴ These are not my only reasons. I note, for example, that the long section Rev. 19. 11 to 21. 8 is framed between two angelic revelations in 17. 1 to 19. 10 and 21. 9 to 22. 5 – both of which revelations are made by one of the angels with golden bowls full of the wrath of God. That is, Rev. 21. 9-22.5 bring us back with a bump to one of those angels with bowls full of the seven last plagues – to the time when God's judgements will be poured out on earth prior establishing millennial kingdom. See, JND, *Notes on the Apocalypse*, pages 149-150. And I note that both these bookend sections – 17. 1-19. 10 and 21. 9-22. 5 – *open* with the very same words, 'One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, 'Come, I will show you' . . . Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit' – and then *close* in the same way, with the angel assuring John that 'these words' are true, 19. 9; 22. 6, and with John's – unsuccessful – attempt to worship the angel who spoke to him – terminating with John being told, 'See do it not, I am your fellow bond-slave . . . worship God', 19. 10; 22. 8-9. The two angelic revelations of chapters 17-18 and 21-22 provide a sharp contrast between two cities portrayed as women – unclean Babylon 'the great whore', 17. 1, and 'holy' Jerusalem, the Lamb's wife. Exit the prostitute – enter the Bride! I note in passing that when John is summoned to witness the doom of Babylon, he is carried by the angel carried into the wilderness/desert, 17. 3 – perhaps suggesting how God viewed all Babylon's vaunted wealth and glory, but when he is summoned to consider the Lamb's wife, he is carried to the lofty vantage point of a great and high mountain, 21. 10.

¹⁵ The very same language is used on both occasions; 'Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God', vv. 2, 10.

¹⁶ The Book of Revelation abounds in Old Testament allusions and language, but is important to note that this does not mean that the words carry exactly the same meaning and significance. Indeed, such allusions are often applied in a far deeper and more profound sense. This is clearly true of the expression 'new heavens and new earth' in Isaiah 65 and 66 (Isa. 65. 17; 66. 22). 'Behold', God says in Isaiah 65, 'I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind ... I create Jerusalem a rejoicing ... and the voice of weeping shall be no more heard in her, nor the voice of crying. There shall be no more thence an infant of days, nor an old man that hath not filled his days: for the child shall *die* a hundred years old; but the sinner being a hundred years old shall be accursed', Isa. 65. 17-20. As I understand it, the prophet looked beyond the judgment which was to fall upon his nation of Judah to a period of restoration when the former things would no longer be remembered and all things would be made new – new, that is, at the time following the regeneration of Israel and the earth – in the Millennium – when, according to Romans 8, the earth will be freed from its bondage to corruption and decay. But it is clear from this passage in Isaiah 65 that during that Millennial Kingdom, sin and death will not have been entirely banished. Yes, premature and untimely death will be unknown – but death itself will still exist. Whereas what John sees in Revelation 21 is 'a new heaven and a new earth' where there will be no more death, Rev. 21. 4.

¹⁷ Revelation 14. 8; 16. 19 (twice – although the first occurrence may refer to Jerusalem); 17. 1, 5, 18; 18. 2, 10, 16, 18, 19, 21; 19. 2; 21. 10.

¹⁸ In verse 9, the angel promises to show John *the bride*. What would we expect to see? Surely the bride! But no – the great city! Here in verse 2, John tells us that he saw a city. What would we expect him to describe? A city! But no – he speaks of the city as a bride, adorned for her husband.

¹⁹ 'I Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches', Rev. 2. 16.

²⁰ Rev. 19. 6-8.

²¹ Also, in Rev. 22. 19, God warns, 'if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall *take away his part out of* the book of life, and out of *the holy city*'.

²² Solomon's question, 'will God indeed dwell with men on the earth?', 2 Chron. 6. 18 – received a wonderful answer in the incarnation – but it will receive another wonderful answer when God will tabernacle eternally with men through those who form part of the New Jerusalem.

²³ Now God's ultimate and eternal purpose is realised. For, according to 1 Corinthians 15. 24-28, our Lord Jesus, as the Son of Man of Psalm 8, having subdued every last enemy – death included – having **put down** all rule and all authority and power, will then **deliver up** the kingdom to the Father that God (the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit) may be 'all in all'.

Perhaps like George Washington at the close of the Revolutionary War, hurried away from the last battle, where he had received the surrendered sword of Lord Cornwallis, to Annapolis, where the Colonial Congress was in session, and there surrendered up his commission, going out of office forever?

One of His principal and foremost enemies is *death*. Indeed, death will hold out to the final scene and episode of all. It will be the last enemy to be destroyed, v. 26, – but destroyed it *will* be! Death, Paul insists here, will not have the last word. But Death, the last enemy, can *only* be said to be vanquished *if* his terrible grip is broken – that is, *if* he is compelled to yield up all his victims – to release his hold once and for ever on all his captives. That is, to put it simply, for death to be roundly defeated – all men must be raised at some point or other! The point is that death – the last enemy – *must* be subdued – must be defeated – before it can be said that *all* Christ's enemies are beneath His feet. And, *until that moment*, He – the Son – is unable to deliver up the subdued kingdom to God – and, until then, God cannot be all in all. In other words, Paul is saying – and it is important that we follow his argument – that God's ultimate and eternal purpose *cannot* be fulfilled – God cannot 'be all in all' – unless first the dead – all the dead – have been raised! Verses 20-28 therefore demonstrate conclusively that the dead must rise.

²⁴ In passing, we should note that the title 'overcomer' of verse 7 – the one who 'shall inherit these things' – refers, not to a member of an elite band of super-spiritual Christians, but to every true Christian. As John wrote elsewhere, 'Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?', 1 John 5. 5. 'He who overcomes shall inherit these things', God said, 'and I will be his God and he shall be my son'. Well did Paul say, 'if a son, then an heir of God through Christ', Gal. 4. 7. How wonderfully personal. And we inherit, as Peter would say, 'an inheritance, incorruptible, undefiled and unfading', 1 Pet. 1. 4.²⁴ The devil could show all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, Luke 4. 5, but it will take eternity for God to reveal to us all He has laid up for us. Yet the narrative doesn't end there. Clearly the 'fleeing away' of heaven and earth, 20. 11, has no effect on the reality of the lake of fire – which remains – and ever shall – a place of unending doom. And so the precious promise of verse 7 becomes the solemn warning of verse 8, which speaks of an alternative – and fearful – destiny for men ... for all those who, as you heard last month, whose names are 'not found written in the book of life', 20. 15 ... a place not of eternal bliss but of eternal torment, 20. 10 – the second death. But we cannot miss how, before speaking again of this dreadful place, the God who wants none to perish, first breaks in to make His Gracious offer in verse 6 – 'I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely' – without payment or price ... where, over against 'the lake', He sets 'the fountain'; over against 'fire', He sets 'water'; and over against 'death' He sets 'life'.

Yes indeed, to the unworthy recipient the water of life – and with it a heavenly destiny – is offered free – but, as we know, it first cost the Giver an enormous – a staggering – price.

²⁵ The best we can do is contrast these eternal realities with our present experience. And we are assured that all the hideous by-products of sin – sorrow, pain, and death etc. – will have no place there.

²⁶ This phrase echoes to some extent the refrain of the angel who pronounced doom on Babylon, 18. 21-23, but with one glorious difference. There the things that would be 'no more' were not of themselves bad.

²⁷ Compare Matt. 4. 5; 27. 53. 'Jerusalem is simply called the holy city without any name; this corresponds to the widespread practice of later Judaism and of a tradition which reaches well back into Old Testament history', TDNT, VI, page 530. See Neh. 11. 1; Isa. 48. 2; 52. 1; 66. 20 – and other references given on page 524 of the Kittel article.

²⁸ The writer to the Hebrews noted the point carefully – 'the bodies of those beasts, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin (that is, the carcasses of the bullock and the goat on the Day of Atonement), are burned outside the camp', he wrote (with his eye on Lev. 16. 27), adding, 'Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate', Heb. 13. 11-12.

²⁹ In John 2, our Lord had earlier used the expression 'My Father's house' to describe the temple in the earthly Jerusalem. There the operative – the key – word was 'out' – 'He found in the temple those who sold oxen, sheep and doves, and the moneychangers doing business. When He had made a whip of cords, He drove them all *out* of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen, and poured *out* the changers' money and overturned the tables. And He said to those who sold doves, Take these things *out*! Do not make My Father's house a house of merchandise!',

John 2. 14-16. 'Out ... out ...out!' But, if in chapter 2 the key word is 'out', in chapter 14 the key word is 'in'; 'In my Father's house'.

And, interestingly, *Jesus* spoke to His disciples of going to prepare a *place for them* when He was in *the place* which *they* had just prepared *for Him*. For in – not John – but Mark 14, we read, 'He sent two of his disciples, and said to them, Go (note) into the city, and a man carrying a pitcher (jar) of water will meet you. Follow him. And wherever he enters, say to the householder ... The Teacher says, Where is the guest room, in which I may eat the Passover with my disciples? And he will show you a large upper room furnished and ready; there **prepare** (the same word as in John 14) for us. And the disciples went out and came into the city, and found it just as he had said to them; and they **prepared** (the same word again) the Passover', vv. 13-16.²⁹ It was therefore in the 'place' which the disciples had 'gone' to 'prepare' for Him, that He spoke of 'going' to 'prepare' a 'place' for them!

³⁰ Indeed, I see this verse as something of a hinge in Matthew's gospel. I compare it with, 'From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand', 4. 17.

³¹ Our Lord could have applied to Himself the words of the prophet Jeremiah in Lamentations 1, 'Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Behold and see If there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which is done to me, wherewith the Lord has inflicted me in the day of His fierce anger', v. 12.

³² 'As He drew near, He saw the city and wept over it, saying, If you had known, even you, in this your day, the things that make for your peace!', Luke 19. 41-42.

³³ 'When Jesus saw Mary weeping, and the Jews who came with her weeping, He groaned in spirit and was troubled. And He said, Where have you laid him? They said to Him, Lord, come and see. Jesus wept', John 11. 35.

³⁴ God saved Him from death by bringing Him out of it – 'Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from (out of) the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep', Heb. 13. 20.

³⁵ The only time *recorded* when He addressed Him this way.

³⁶ Matt. 26. 63-68.

³⁷ 'Lest I come and strike the land with utter destruction'. The word translated 'a curse' is a rather technical word – meaning properly to be accursed – to be doomed – to be appointed to utter destruction. This is the word used to describe the fate of the Canaanites; for example, 'of the cities of these peoples which the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance, you shall let nothing that breathes remain alive, but you shall *utterly destroy* them', Deut. 20. 16-17. That is, Malachi is saying, if God's people refuse to repent and continue to resemble the Canaanites in character, far from their land being 'a delightful land', Mal. 3. 12, their land will necessarily share the fate of the land of the Canaanites in being wholly destroyed.

³⁸ Gal. 3. 10-14. Paul is quoting Deut. 27. 26 and 21. 23.

³⁹ We read that, when He was *born*, 'the glory of Lord shone around them' – and to the shepherds of Bethlehem the *night* became ablaze with *light*. But, when the Lord *died*, the *light* of noonday became dark as *night*!

⁴⁰ One of the reasons believers are not to love the world is because all that is in the world is transient and passing, 1 John 2. 15-17.