

**JOHN'S EPISTLES**  
**CERTAINTY IN THE FACE OF CHANGE:**  
**BY BRIAN JOHNSTON**

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# CHAPTER ONE

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For some people the future had never seemed so uncertain. While the British public had been presented with the Millennium Dome; in Israel another project was dubbed 'the Millennium Doom'. During the approach to the new millennium, media reports were anticipating that Israel would use computer technology to thrill millions of millennium pilgrims expected to flock to the biblical site of Armageddon, the world's ultimate battlefield. This proposal for multimedia visitor centres using virtual reality features led cynics to snipe that the end of the world may be virtually nigh. The location in the valley of Jezreel, overlooked by the Mount of Megiddo, stands astride the old trunk route from Egypt to Syria, and has been the scene of mighty battles throughout history.

The last book of the Bible, the Revelation given by Christ to his beloved disciple, John, is a book of awesome apocalyptic visions of the future; with Armageddon being the scene of a final battle. The writings of the apostle John are well accepted as being among the last New Testament documents to be written. They are generally accepted as being written towards the close of the first century, by which time John would have been an old man in his nineties. No doubt uncertainties abounded as the first century came to its close, much in the same way as anxieties and fears shrouded the minds of a great many people at the turn of this millennium. John's writings were timely then for countering the views of heretics, which were gaining ground. One thing

that is fascinating as you read John's letters is that some of the unorthodox and even bizarre notions that were around then are once again in vogue after almost two thousand years.

To read John's letters is to enter another world altogether, a world whose characteristic marks are assurance, confidence and boldness. If even today, people around us are being swept up in a current of anxiety, it is here in John's writings that we can fall back on a stockpile of assurances. To read these letters again, against all the background of hype, and even panic, which surrounded the advent of the year 2000, what is impressive is the resounding theme of Christian certainty that comes across. If ever there was a time we needed to hear it surely that time is now.

As John presents it in the first of his letters, Christian certainty is a double certainty. First, the certainty that Christianity itself is true. What we are considering here are objective facts: things rooted in history. Which brings us back to that whole idea of a new millennium. Across the world people may have been celebrating the arrival of the year 2000, but what actually happened just around two thousand years ago? The answer, of course, is that a baby was born in the obscure Middle Eastern town of Bethlehem. There was no great public fanfare announcing His birth, but He would grow up to become the most famous man in history. Jesus Christ was born of a virgin. He lived an absolutely perfect life. He had power over nature. He healed people and raised the dead. He claimed to be the Son of God. He rose again after being put to death. His followers claimed, and still claim, that forgiveness with God is only to be found in Him, that is in Jesus Christ. The historical facts that underpin the Christian faith are hard evidence that is unchanging even as we enter a new

millennium. This is where we can draw our certainty from, John reminds us. He opens his first letter by saying:

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of Life - the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us - that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the father and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write to you that your joy may be full” (1 Jn.1:1-14.)

According to John, certainty is not to be found in novelty. Faith with which to face our future must draw on ‘that which is from the beginning,’ those defining events which took place back at the beginning of these two millennia. And John goes on to comment on the purpose that lay behind the fact of Jesus’ coming 2,000 years ago: “For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil” (1 Jn.3:8). It is not surprising then that evil spirits opposed and still do oppose Him, leading John to say next: “Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God” (1 Jn.4:2,3). Finally, John writes: “Jesus ... the Son of God ... is He who came by water and blood - Jesus Christ; not only by water, but by water and blood” (1 Jn.5:5,6). And then with equal confidence by the Spirit of God, he sums his message up in a verse that reads like a creed: “And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know

Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life” (1 Jn.5:20).

It is vital at the passing of these two millennia to consider how they began, and who they began with. We date our birth by the calendar, but Jesus Christ dated the calendar by His birth. Knowing Him, the Man behind the millennium, is essential for our salvation and ongoing life of service for God. It is time to refresh our knowledge of someone whose life was so powerful that it reset the clocks. Only the certainty of knowing Him can take us safely forward into whatever time is left. Which brings us to the other certainty. The other certainty that the apostle John writes of in his letters, especially the first letter, concerns the Christian’s assurance of personally belonging to God’s family and being the possessor of eternal life. So there is a beautiful balance in the double certainty presented by John in his letters, covering on the one hand, the objective truth of the Christian faith with its historic basis; while at the same time also recognizing the realm of subjective experience that is the Christian believer’s personal convictions.

## CHAPTER TWO

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One man's nightmare is often another man's dream come true. In advance of the arrival of the year 2000 there were different attitudes to the varying forecasts as to what it would bring. On the one hand there was the fear of massive high-tech melt-down with malfunctioning microchips, randomly flashing traffic lights and zero-balance bank accounts. On the other hand, for those who had any degree of back-to-the-earth mentality, that kind of digital apocalypse was music to their ears.

In rural America, long before the arrival of the year 2000, some groups with New Age beliefs had begun to do brisk business in selling non-perishable bulk foods: dried blueberries and other chaos-resistant delicacies. They were looking to the collapse of the information age so loathed by them, and its replacement with a new Golden Age.

That brings us to what is, perhaps, the defining idea underpinning all the other beliefs and values characterized today as 'New Age'. It is the idea that claims we are close to a breakthrough into a new age, that we are on the verge of evolving a new global consciousness. A lot is talked up about the passage from the so-called Age of Pisces to the Age of Aquarius. This spiritual evolution is bound up with the claim that humankind will reach its full potential when sufficient people personally discover their self-divinity: that is the god within them, or so they believe.

Then, they claim, a new age will dawn: a golden age free from violence and disease, a perfect world where we all live as one.

New Age philosophy regards Jesus as the most advanced human ever to have lived. They would say He manifested Christ-consciousness, as though the Christ spirit had descended to reveal divine truth to people in Jesus. In many ways there is nothing really new about any of this. Very similar heretic views about the person of Jesus Christ were already being expressed around the turn of the first century. Whatever else we say about them at the turn of a new millennium, one thing we cannot say is that they are new! The existence in his day of these heresies was surely one reason why the apostle John was so keen to stress Christian certainties, especially when writing the first of the Bible letters which bears his name. His writing in our Bibles has the ring of real assurance about it as he emphasizes that Jesus is the Son of God and throws out the challenge: "Every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God".

That verse, found in 1 John 4:3, is a very interesting one. There is an old reading of the verse that gets a mention in the margin of some Bible versions (e.g. the Revised Version) in which "not to confess Jesus" is regarded as "annulling or loosing Jesus". It seems that this matter of failing to confess Jesus, was once, long ago, understood as separating Jesus from the Christ, instead of identifying them as one and the same. This certainly fits with what we know of the heretics' views at the close of the first century. They taught that the Christ, a divine spirit, descended upon the man Jesus at His baptism and withdrew from Him before His death. To counteract this heresy, the apostle John's language is so precise. It was not that the Christ, or Christ spirit, had come into

the flesh of Jesus, but that Jesus was the Christ come in the flesh. Jesus and the Christ are to be absolutely identified. What is at stake here is the truth of the incarnation.

In the incarnation, the Word becoming flesh as John put it in opening his Gospel, we have the truth of Immanuel: "God with us". We also have one of the great historical events of the Christian faith, which leads the apostle John to close his first letter with words that ring with Christian certainty: "And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life" (1 Jn.5:20). What reasons can we find in John's letter for this tremendous conviction that Jesus is the Son of God, that Jesus of Nazareth was God come in the flesh? There are at least three.

The first is what we have just been describing: historical events such as the birth, baptism and death of Jesus Christ. Then there is the witness of the apostles. John, you remember, has opened this letter by speaking of the direct experience of the apostles in seeing and hearing Jesus Christ. "The life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness", he could say (1 Jn.1:2). And thirdly, John mentions the "anointing from the Holy One" (1 Jn.2:20) by means of which Christian believers are enabled to know the truth, especially the truth about Jesus Christ. In this way, John is referring to the gift of the Holy Spirit which every believer on the Lord Jesus Christ receives at conversion. He is the Spirit of truth and guides us into all the truth, even as the Lord promised, and as recorded by John in his Gospel (Jn.16:13).

Christianity is therefore firmly anchored to historical realities. Christian certainty is confirmed not only by the contemporary testimony of the Holy Spirit within Christians, but also by the eyewitness report of the apostles who had actually been with Him and could vouch for the reality of events like the resurrection. Those are the three great assurances John gives for the truth of Christianity: the assurance of history, of the apostles, and of the Holy Spirit. Preserving the real truth about Christ was an issue that greatly concerned John. He comes back to it again in his second letter when emphasizing the need to remain 'in the doctrine of Christ' (2 Jn. v.9). The historical basis for his convictions about the person of Jesus Christ surface again in the challenge:

“Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? This is He who came by water and blood - Jesus Christ: not only by water, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who bears witness, because the Spirit is truth ... there are three that bear witness on earth: the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree as one. If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater, for this is the witness of God which He has testified of His Son” (1 Jn.5:5-9).

Why does John insist that Jesus came 'by water and blood'? What does this mean anyway? An old interpretation which makes sense of the background, understands the water and blood as standing for the historical experiences the Lord passed through in His baptism and death. Again we ask, why this emphasis? Why select Jesus Christ's baptism? It appears there was a man, a contemporary of John's, by the name of Cerinthus. He was one of those heretics, perhaps foremost among them, who distinguished between 'Jesus' and 'the Christ'. Their opinion was

that Jesus was a mere man, born naturally of Joseph and Mary, a man upon whom the Christ descended at his baptism and from whom the Christ departed before the Cross. In other words, this heresy claimed that the Christ was united with Jesus at his baptism, but that Jesus became separated again from the Christ spirit before dying on the cross.

These false teachings still ring bells today. We still have with us those who deny the virgin birth, the reality of the eternal Word becoming flesh; as well as those who say that the One who died on the cross was no longer the Christ, that God's Christ could never be crucified. The apostle John, the eyewitness, refutes all that in expressing Christian certainty for all time. John smashes these heresies to smithereens by saying categorically: This is He who came by water and blood - Jesus Christ; not only by water, but by water and blood'. Anxiety gives way to assurance as we "remain in the doctrine of Christ", the doctrine which the apostle John has expressed with such clarity and certainty for all time.

## CHAPTER THREE

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**W**e refer to the apostle John's writings as 'end-time writings' because it seems that they were the last of the New Testament documents to be written. There is an additional sense in which they were end-time writings, and that is because John was writing at the close of the era of the apostles: the apostles being those who had kept company with Jesus and been specially commissioned by Him. What is more, John, it is usually reckoned, was writing in the final years of the first century. So, as John wrote, all these things were coming to a close: the first century, the era of the apostles and the New Testament itself.

Since we too are living in changing times, it seems meaningful to relate John's writings to our own situation.

Indeed, what John has to say is powerfully relevant as we explore together his theme of certainty: a theme especially strong in the first of his letters. It is good to be assured of some certainties whenever we face up to change. Political patterns are changing: with a shift to the centre in some places and to the margins in others. On an international scale, ethnic feuds seem to be re-drawing old maps. And how social patterns have changed since our grandparents' generation! Today the traditional family is considered only one way among others of rearing the next generation. Divorce has become much more commonplace and marriage less so, at least marriage without some kind of experimentation first.

Standards of decency have fallen while levels of crime continue to rise. Things which were once considered safe to do, like taking an evening walk, are often no longer so. However, it is to be doubted if it is all negative. In financial terms at least, a great many are better off than in previous generations; but respect for authority and a sense of community have definitely been eroded. Furthermore, there seems to be a culture abroad now that distrusts absolutes. This last point can easily affect Christians too. If we have begun to speak our message softly, shyly, and without conviction, then we could do a lot worse than read once again the writings of the apostle John, for they are just brimming over with confidence, boldness and assurance, as any study of the main verbs and nouns he uses would show. He has much to say about 'knowing' the certainty.

Already we have explored how he presents a double certainty. He expresses certainty about Christianity itself, and also, for the believer on the Lord Jesus, certainty about possessing eternal life. For John, what may be known for certain about Christianity finds three supports which we identified as being its historical foundation, the apostolic witness, as well as the contemporary witness and confirmatory witness of the Holy Spirit in changed lives. In John's first letter he also gives three assurances for the second certainty he presents: is the certainty of knowing, that through faith, we personally have been born into God's spiritual family, and as a result possess eternal life.

John's repeated message is that those who 'believe' may 'know'. He speaks of knowing Him, Jesus Christ (1 Jn.2:3) and then goes on to speak of knowing 'that we are in Him' (v.5); and later of knowing 'we are of God' and 'of the truth' (1 Jn.5:19; 1 Jn.4:6;

1 Jn.3:19). Finally in his last chapter, he speaks about knowing that we 'have eternal life' (1 Jn.5:13).

Many people today speak of hoping they will be acceptable to God and one day enter into His presence. John, however, writes of knowledge that is certain. The three ways he gives by which we can be sure that we are already eternally secure are: by believing; by obeying; and by loving.

The first is about maintaining our deep conviction in the truth about Jesus, the Son of God. Again and again in chapter five alone, he stresses that it is those who believe in the Son of God (1 Jn.5:5,10,13) who know they have eternal life. Sadly some believers, by losing faith, lose the assurance of their salvation, even though they cannot lose salvation itself. The second assurance, he says, is by means of keeping the Lord's commands and doing the things that are right: "By this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments" (1 Jn.2:3). In the next chapter, John adds, 'Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God. In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God' (1 Jn.3:9,10). This does not mean that we ought to be sinless, for John has already told us that "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves" (1 Jn.1:8). What it does mean is that at the time of our conversion a new nature was born within us. This new nature cannot sin, but we do still have the old nature which will not finally be removed until we are changed at the coming of Christ. Consistent with this new nature, the practice of righteousness ought to characterize those who are God's children, and be typical of them. When that is the case, it serves as

a further assurance to our own hearts that a work of God's grace has been done there. In this sense we read: "everyone who practices righteousness is born of Him" (1 Jn.2:29).

The third way of assuring ourselves that we have been born into God's family and so possess eternal life is in the matter of loving one another. To see how strongly this comes over as an assurance of our new birth and possession of eternal life, we only have to read some more verses from chapters three and four "... let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth. And by this we know that we are of the truth" (1 Jn.3:18,19); and "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love" (1 Jn.4:7,8).

So there we have it: the certainty that the believer has eternal life. It is a certainty that is assured three times over, when we retain our convictions about the person of the Lord Jesus, practise His righteous commandments, and love each other. John says these things to those of us who already believe in the name of the Son of God, so that we may really know that we have eternal life. How wonderful it is to have a strong, a threefold assurance of the certainty of having a place in God's family and of being the possessor of eternal life! Let no-one misunderstand what John is saying. His theme here is not the obtaining of salvation, but the assurance of salvation. Keeping the commandments and loving each other are not things we have to do so as to qualify for salvation, or remain saved from the judgement of our sins: but if we are saved by faith through God's grace alone, and then do these things, we will be able to say with the hymn writer:

## BRIAN JOHNSTON

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!

Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine!

Heir of salvation, purchase of God,

Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood.

This is my story, this is my song,

Praising my Savior all the day long;

This is my story, this is my song,

Praising my Savior all the day long.

## CHAPTER FOUR

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At the close of the first century, John the aged apostle had, not a dream, but a vision from the Lord Himself. That vision was an unveiling of the Christ of God. The Bible word 'revelation' or apocalypse, basically means an unveiling. As we see from the opening chapter of the book of Revelation, it is not so much an unveiling of the future as it is an unveiling of Jesus Christ. Of course, the visions of the book of Revelation were indeed visions of the future, but we may view the whole book as an unveiling of the glory of Jesus Christ as He stands related to the eternal purposes of God. These purposes are shown to come to a magnificent and appropriate climax at the end of this last book of the Bible.

### **The First Vision**

This is how John describes his first vision, a vision of the glorified person of Jesus Christ:

"John, both your brother and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was on the island that is called Patmos for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ. I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day. and I heard behind me a loud voice, as of a trumpet, saying. 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last', and. 'What you see. write in a book and send it to the seven churches which are in Asia: to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamos. to Thyatira. to Sardis,

to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea.' Then I turned to see the voice that spoke with me.

And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands. and in the midst of the seven lampstands One like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band. His head and His hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes like a flame of fire; His feet were like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace, and His voice as the sound of many waters: He had in His right hand seven stars, out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword, and His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength. And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying to me. 'Do not be afraid: I am the First and the Last. I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death. Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this" (Rev.1:9-19).

The central character in the apostle John's vision, the raised and glorified Jesus Christ, is the same One who defines the crossroads of history; where the years BC and AD meet. The fact that our calendar has been dated in relation to the birth of Christ is surely all the evidence anyone needs to be assured of His historical existence, if evidence should be required from outside the Bible, that is.

### **Glory Veiled**

John had met Him one day about sixty years before he got this vision and at that time John had responded to His call to follow

Him. In those days the Lord's glory was veiled as He toured the country teaching and healing. 'Veiled in flesh the Godhead see' runs the line in the ever popular Christmas carol: 'Hark the herald angels sing'. It is true, for the most part His divine glory was veiled: what many people saw was a Man whose identity was hidden from them. 'Isn't this the carpenter's son?' was their typical response.

In the year 2000, the international News magazine TIME ran a feature on 'this century's greatest minds': brief word portraits of the hundred most influential people of the century, as judged by some editorial panel. Some choices were less controversial than others: choices like Einstein who left his imprint on the atom bomb, space travel and electronics. The last century alone saw the atom split, the psyche probed, genes spliced and sheep cloned. It invented plastic, radar and the silicon chip. It built aeroplanes, rockets, satellites, televisions, computers and atom bombs. It overthrew traditional ideas about learning, mathematics, economics and even the fabric of space and time itself.

Yet for all their achievements, the earthly life that has affected humanity more than any other is not found in TIME'S write-up, nor does it belong to the last century at all. Nineteen centuries have come and gone since that life. Today it is Jesus Christ who remains the central figure of the human race, and the leader of mankind's progress. The vision John received unveils for us the true identity of 'the Man behind the Millennium'.

### **The Effect of One Life**

Consider this description of Him: “He was someone who was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another village, where He worked in a carpenter’s shop until He was thirty. Then for three years He was a wandering preacher. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family or owned a house. He did not go to college. He never visited a big city (at least not by today’s standards). He never travelled more than two hundred miles from the place where He was born. He did none of the things one usually associates with greatness. He was only thirty-three when the tide of public opinion turned against Him. His friends ran away. He was turned over to His enemies, and went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a Cross between two thieves. When He was dying His executioners gambled for His clothing, the only property He had on earth. When He was dead He was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend’. Yet, it has been said that ‘all the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected life on this planet so much as His one solitary life”.

### **The Unveiling**

This figure who has just been described as the central figure in the history of the human race is the central figure in the revelation given to the apostle John while in exile on the island of Patmos. The revelation John received was an unveiling of Jesus Christ in all His majesty as the Son of God, the One who stands at the centre of all God’s eternal purposes. If we find it hard to believe that His could be the most influential life this earth has ever known, then we have not sufficiently glimpsed His glory. In

the face of change, it may be timely to ask ourselves, 'Does our vision of the future centre on the Person of Jesus Christ?' 'The Man behind the millennium' was and is the Man Jesus: unveiled to John as the One who is Lord and Christ.

## BRIAN JOHNSTON

We hear the words of love,  
We gaze upon the blood,  
We see the mighty sacrifice,  
And we have peace with God.  
'Tis everlasting peace!  
Sure as Jehovah's name;  
'Tis stable as His steadfast throne,  
For evermore the same.  
We change - He changes not;  
His Christ can never die:  
His love, not ours the resting-place,  
His truth, not ours the tie  
Our love is oftentimes low,  
Our joy still ebbs and flows;  
But peace with Him remains the same,  
No change Jehovah knows.  
And yonder is our peace,  
The grave of all our woes;

We know the Son of God has come,  
We know He died and rose.  
We know He liveth now  
At God's right hand above;  
We know the throne on which He sits,  
We know His truth and love!

(H. Bonar)

## CHAPTER FIVE

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**H**ow do you react to the prospect of change? Do you thrive on it or simply dread the thought of it? Many people were anxious about the arrival of the year 2000: especially those whose business interests depend on computers or other information technology or with involvement in stocks and shares.

It Is good when we have faith to face our future with all its unknowns. Nothing can be better than to have confidence in someone who knows the future, to have confidence in God, a confidence that comes through a personal relationship with Him. God holds the key of all unknown, but one day near the start of these two thousand years He used that key to give a glimpse of the future to the apostle John when he was an old man in exile for his faith.

The book of the Revelation begins: "The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants - things which must shortly take place. And He sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John, who bore witness to the word of God. and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, to all things that he saw. Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it: for the time is near... Grace to you and peace from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness,

the first-born from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth.

To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him, and they also who pierced Him. And all the tribes of the earth will mourn because of Him. Even so, Amen" (Rev.1:1-7).

The coming of Christ, His second Advent, has been long promised, but there is no slackness in God's time-keeping. The Revelation to John was 'He is coming', but what does this mean? How will He come, and who is it He is coming for, and are there any clues as to when? In a sense early Christians, almost two thousand years ago had an advantage in that they were much closer than we are to the language in which the New Testament was originally written. In that original language three different Bible words spell out what is going to happen. These words are: presence (*parousia*), revelation (*apokalupsis*) and manifestation (*epiphancia*).

The first of these words emphasizes not so much the simple fact of the Lord's return, but especially His presence with all the Christian believers of this age. Obviously, He must return first for this bodily presence to become a reality. Note the description of this return for believers which the Bible gives us in 1 Thessalonians 4:14-17: "For if we believe ... we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with

the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.”

The experience of His presence in this particular sense begins at the time we have been reading about, which many people refer to as ‘the Rapture’, which means the “seizing up’ of Christ’s Church by Christ Himself. ‘Seizing up’ or ‘snatching away’ are good ways to describe what will happen because all believers at the Lord’s return will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. He does not at that time come all the way down to the earth. He comes to the air and calls us to Him. Then begins this specific period which the Bible refers to as the ‘parousia’ (or presence).

The Bible talks about things which will take place during “the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints” (Revised Version margin reference - which is, we suggest a better translation of 1 Thess.3:13 in the light of 1 Thess.2:19 and 1 Thess.4:14-17). This will certainly include His review of our lives of service: what we have done down here for Him. In the light of that, we are to make it our aim to ensure that we will have a sense of confidence rather than a sense of shame as we stand in His presence and hear His true assessment of our discipleship. This will be a private audience with Him, for this specific time of His presence with us after the Rapture event will, of course, be hidden from the eyes of the world.

Life on this planet will go on after all true Christians have been taken away from it. The salt of the earth will have gone, and the earth will become ever more corrupt. Seven earth years at least

will run their course for the Bible describes them in detail (see Rev.6-18). Terrible judgements and world-wide catastrophes will rock the globe, and the world, or a great many in it, will find themselves looking to a world leader for deliverance, a leader who is quite definitely in opposition to God and His Christ (2 Thess.2:4). When his true colours are revealed it will cost many their lives in trying to escape. During all this time, as the earth ripens for God's judgement, this time of the hidden presence of Christ with His saints will continue.

Then, at a particular moment signalled in advance by God, His hidden presence with us is going to be revealed to the world. It will be dramatically unveiled before the world. This is the stage at which our earlier verse from Revelation applies: "Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him, and they also who pierced Him. And all the tribes of the earth will mourn because of Him". So the second key Bible word that gives us the shape of things to come is this word 'revelation'. There will come a time when the Lord, after having come for us, will unveil His presence, still with us, to the rest of the world.

As a result of this 'revelation', the glory of the Lord is going to be manifested, or in other words: it will become visible. Those are the three Bible words we referred to earlier: presence, revelation (of the parousia to the world) and manifestation. As they apply in our Bibles to the Lord's return, we have first of all His presence with us in the period after the Rapture when He catches us up to be with Himself hidden from the world. Then there will come, after seven years at least have run their course on earth, the moment of revelation to the world as described in Matt.24:27: 'For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so

also will the coming (parousia: this hidden period now ending) of the Son of Man be’.

There is no mention of any other than the Lord and the believer in connection with His presence with the Church after He comes and takes it to be with Himself. Removed and hidden from the world, we will experience His presence with us until the moment when the covering veil is drawn aside (the revealing of Rom.8:19; 2 Thess.1:7) and the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in flaming fire. The effect of this revelation will be that Christ’s presence which we have been enjoying will become visible to the whole world. for the Bible talks of ‘the brightness of His coming’ (2 Thess.2:8). It is then the words of Colossians 3:4 find fulfilment: ‘When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory’.

We suggest that to see it in the orderly way the Bible presents it we need to distinguish between the specific (parousia) period of Christ’s presence with His Church, then its revelation to the world, with the consequent manifestation of Christ and those who belong to Him. The manifestation of the glory of the Lord is the direct result of this revelation of the parousia to the world, and what is being unveiled then is His presence which has been with us in the period prior to that, ever since the event of the Rapture.

## CHAPTER SIX

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It is quite common to see adverts which announce the arrival anytime soon of a world-teacher or Christ figure. New Age advocates anticipate the dawn of a so-called golden age and are happy to key into the idea that many major faiths and religions are waiting for the arrival of some promised figure. It was very natural to talk about Christ's return at the turn of the century, since the two millennia have been dated by his birth and powerful life on this earth. However, when we refer to the return of the Lord Jesus Christ we are not speculating on the basis of religious propaganda but quoting the authority of God's Word.

To pursue our subject further, let us turn for a moment to the closing words recorded by the apostle John in the last chapter of the Book of Revelation (Rev.22:7-20). John tells us he received this message from Jesus Christ Himself: "Behold, / am coming quickly! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book ... And behold. I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me. to give to every one according to his work. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. the First and the Last ... I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things in the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, the Bright and Morning Star'... He who testifies to these things says. 'Surely I am coming quickly'. Amen."

This promise made three times by the Lord Jesus is like a three-fold cord to Christians, one that cannot possibly be broken. The

second time the promise is given, the Lord says, “And My reward is with Me”. That is what we want to say a little about now. The Lord is coming to give to everyone according to their work. As we have emphasized earlier in this series, Christ’s second coming will take place in two stages or two phases. This is teaching confirmed from both the Old and New Testaments of our Bibles. The Lord is coming first of all for those who believe on Him. It is believers who will receive reward from their Lord according to their work, as 2 Corinthians 5:10 says: “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad”.

The judgement seat in New Testament times was a raised platform reached by steps. Originally for public orations, these platforms became identified with the raised dais on which a magistrate sat in assessment at a tribunal. At the judgement seat of Christ the life and service of believers will be assessed. There will be no question of condemnation for sin, for the Bible is very clear on the eternal security of a believer’s salvation, but all believers will stand before Christ at His coming so as to have revealed to them the true stature of their soul and service: enlarged by the good, and diminished by the bad they have done.

Romans 14:10-12, again stresses the all-inclusive nature of this tribunal for believers on the Lord Jesus. It says: “For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. For it is written: “As I live, says the LORD, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall confess to God”. So then each of us shall give account of himself to God’. Since the scripture says ‘each of us’, that highlights the fact that this will be a personal assessment.

We shall each give an individual account of our Christian stewardship. I am reminded of something I once heard about a Chinese emperor. This emperor demanded that all in the imperial orchestra give a solo performance before him. Someone who had bought his place in the prestigious orchestra, and who could not become accomplished enough in time, committed suicide in despair the day before his audition. One day as we, too, appear before our King, there will be no hiding behind others. This account we are to give will be a spoken one, for that is what the word itself suggests. Our tongues will confess even as our knees are bowing in that day. The hymn-writer has captured what will surely be the wish of every one of us on that occasion: I'll wish I had given Him more. When I look on His face, thorn-shadowed face, I'll wish I had given Him more'.

It is not just a question of quantity of course; above all the assessment will be of the quality of our service. "According to the grace of God which was given to me. as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become manifest; for the Day will declare it. because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire" (1 Cor.3:10-15).

A friend who works in the quality control section of a fire-protection business has, as a screen-saver on his computer, a text

drawn from this reading: 'the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is'. Certainly the outbreak of fire is a test of the effectiveness of the equipment they are in business to produce. Notice the reassurance of the last verse; that should anyone's work all be burned up, then he or she will still be saved. It is another reminder to us that the issue of reward for the works that have followed and accompanied salvation is quite separate from the possession of salvation itself, salvation being a gift and not of works. But let us aim not to be workers in wood, hay and stubble, as though working with little regard for the purity of God's truth and our motivation.

Perhaps it would be useful to summarize our threefold judgement as believers in Christ. Our judgement as sinners has passed away from us, having being borne by Christ for us on the Cross; but in this present life we are judged as sons in the sense that God disciplines us as a father deals with his children (Heb.12:5-7). Then, as we have just considered, at the future judgement seat of Christ, we shall be judged or assessed as servants. Now, of course, there is a practical challenge that comes from all this, as we try to imagine what it will be like when we stand before the Lord in that soon-coming day. Students who know they have an exam coming up, will try to study the topics or issues that are likely to crop up. What can we find out from the Bible about what the Lord will be looking for in that day?

Paul writes to the Thessalonians encouraging them to "abound in love to one another ... so that He may establish your hearts blameless" (1 Thess.3:12,13). So the issue of loving one another well is one that is bound to come up. Then from the apostle John's writings there is the instruction to "abide in Him, that

when He appears, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming” (1 Jn.2:28). That is clearly the issue of daily communion, and all that flows from it, of course. In his second letter, John goes on further to say: “Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but that we may receive a full reward” (2 Jn. v.8).

John was speaking as an apostle of Christ and of the things the apostles had worked for in and through their teaching. So an important element of the coming review will certainly be what we have done in our lives with the apostles’ teaching - whether we have shown disregard for it or continued steadfastly in it, as those first believers in the Jerusalem Church of God did. Which really brings us on to Hebrews 13:17 where we read: “Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account’. It is clear then that our attitude to our church elders will be very relevant to the assessment of our service.

As we feel there is potential in our lives for a deficiency in any of these aspects of our service then the impact should not be to make us dread the day of His appearing, but rather that we begin now to give attention to these matters in view of the arrival of that coming day. We end on the positive note struck in 1 Corinthians 4:5: “Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts; and then each one’s praise will come from God”. At that time when after His coming we shall stand before Him and our life and service will be reviewed, when even our motives will be exposed, for some things that might have appeared impressive may turn out to have

been done for self glory and of no value therefore in God's sight. Knowing we shall stand before the One whose eyes are like a flame of fire, we take comfort in reading that 'each one shall have his praise from God'. The Lord is so gracious, He is not looking to find fault, but for reasons to positively commend our service.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

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As the year 2000 approached, billions of pounds were spent to mitigate the effect of anticipated widespread disruption arising from the fact that computers have clocks and date programs inside them, and older versions could get confused as to which century they were in. In the event, the dateline was passed with hardly a headline: triggering only a debate as to whether this was the result of effective preparation or overstatement of the problem. On the side of the former is the reported case of the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission which back in 1998 had looked at the Seabrook nuclear power station in New Hampshire and found so-called ‘millennium bug’ problems, which, unless fixed, in their opinion would have affected the computers that monitor vital safety functions charged with keeping the nuclear reactor cool. Little wonder that reports of that type had raised the spectre of Chernobyl!

It was that kind of uncertainty that was seized upon by religious millennialists. Some Christian authors began writing about how ‘millennium bug’ problems could trigger a financial melt-down leading to an international depression, making it possible for the Antichrist or his emissaries to establish a one-world currency or a dominant one-world economic system. The international news magazine TIME in conjunction with CNN conducted a poll during 1999 in which they asked people what their state of preparedness was for the year 2000, bearing in mind especially all they had heard about the so-called ‘millennium bug’.

Forty-seven per cent of those questioned said they would take extra cash out of their bank account. Thirty-three per cent said they would stockpile food and water; while twenty-three per cent intended to stockpile fuel. Twenty-six per cent of folks planned on keeping family members at home just so as to be sure. One thing we can say from the Bible with absolute confidence is: this world is not going to end any-time soon. The Bible does tell us, without putting a date to it, that there are going to be plenty of big changes ahead. We can expect trends towards a global market and global economy in which all buying and selling can be regulated, and trends toward big government featuring the amalgamation of individual nations into confederated kingdom states all owning allegiance to a dominant world power.

These are trends anticipated by those who read and study the Bible. In the same way people who read and studied their Bibles knew, long before it happened in modern history, that there was going to be a modern state of Israel once again occupying its ancient homeland and that this would be a source of continual tension in the Middle East. The preparation the Bible urges upon us is of being prepared to meet our God (Amos 4:12), which includes being ready for the second coming of Jesus Christ. In this series, we have been thinking about the return of Christ even as He promised: "Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. 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" (Jn.14:1-3).

These words were for those who believed in Him: those who were His followers. Christ is coming back first of all to take all true Christians to be with Himself. Bible students popularly refer to this as the 'Rapture of the Church'. In other words, the time when the Lord Jesus will snatch away from this world all born-again believers and take them to be with Himself. All believers on the Lord Jesus whether dead or alive at the time of Christ's return will go. All believers since the time of the New Testament apostles form Christ's Church, biblically called 'the church, which is His body' (Eph.1:22,23). It is this Church that Christ is coming back for. It is viewed in our Bibles as the Bride of Christ with Jesus Christ Himself as the heavenly Bridegroom.

In this connection, Jesus' words, "I go to prepare a place for you", may have a special significance. In the land and time of the Bible, marriage customs included a betrothal period before the wedding ceremony. Betrothal, however, was much more formal than our present day engagement. It was then the bride gave her consent to what was usually her parents' choice of groom, and the parties established the terms of the marriage contract. They were legally bound from that time until the marriage was consummated after the actual wedding which was usually a year or so later. In the intervening time both bride and groom had duties to fulfil in preparation for marriage to each other. The groom, for his part, worked hard to prepare the bridal chamber. Often this was done by adding a room to his father's house. Christ said that in His Father's house are many rooms, many mansions, and He is preparing a place for us there. He is getting it ready to receive His blood-bought bride. Another responsibility on the groom's side

was that he, or more normally his father, paid what was known as the 'bride-price'<sup>1</sup>.

The Lord Jesus paid the ultimate price for His bride when He gave Himself for her at the Cross. Remember how we can read in Ephesians 5:25-27: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for it, that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish." Christ's Church is His bride, and the bride's preparations are hinted at in Rev.19 which is among the writings of the apostle John that we have focused on in this book: "let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready. And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, dean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints" (Rev.19:7.8).

We have often said, that good works do not earn us salvation, and neither do they, for the Bible says salvation is a gift by the grace of God. Now we can see where good works really do fit in. Christian acts of service are pictured as being the bridal dress of the Church which is the bride of Christ. The apostle John gives us this entrancing glimpse in Revelation of the heavenly wedding ceremony which celebrates the union of Christ and His Church, that is all believers. Very likely there is a link back again to eastern wedding customs, this time affecting the bride's preparations. At the betrothal stage, the groom gave white linen to the bride in order for it to be made into her wedding dress.

During the period up until the wedding ceremony itself, he continued to give personal trinkets to be sewn into the dress. They could be of gold or silver or precious stones and the bride sewed them into the dress so that, in a way, the groom would be able to look at his bride adorned in this dress and see himself in her. Let us realize we are preparing our wedding dress by all that we do for our Lord now in His service. Whatever practical preparations we make for earthly things must be left as a matter of personal judgement, but we can and must prepare for future and heavenly events which God's Word says are certain and imminent.

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