

The Final Harvest

by John W. Ritenbaugh

Forerunner, "Personal," September-October 1996

For some reason, cemeteries fascinated my father. Quite frequently when I was a young boy, after church on warm summer Sundays, he would take the family on a tour through Allegheny Cemetery about two miles from the Methodist church we attended. It was an old-style cemetery with many large, sometimes ostentatious granite and marble mausoleums, statues and pillars. The cemetery was well maintained, with shady hardwood trees, great stone and steel gates arching over the entrances, hilly terrain, winding paved drives, ponds for fish, and displays of flowers to give joyous color to what otherwise might be a depressing place.

Many people important to the Pittsburgh area and even some of national prominence are buried there. It is the final resting place for quite a few more nobody knew except their families. Now, my father is buried there, along with his parents and most of his brothers and sisters.

I do not recall ever questioning why we went there. Rather, I remember enjoying it because it was a place of mystery with a touch of reverence and beauty. I think I know now, though, why my Dad liked to go there.

For the most part, my Dad was gentle, soft-spoken, thoughtful and kind. I think he was also a romantic who liked to go to the cemetery and wonder about, dream or imagine the kind of lives those tombstones represented. He must have wondered where they were and what they were doing. Were they alive—in heaven, in hell? Were they aware of him?

He never received any answers to those questions. By the time he died, his attitude toward God was ambivalent at best and bitter at worst. He told me once that if there was a God, he would never bow down and pray to One who would let such suffering take place on earth.

Even though he had seen a lot of hypocrisy from the religious among his brothers and sisters, and though he was generally turned off by religion, he never seemed to hold it against me that I became a minister. In fact, he paid me a very high compliment after he heard me give a sermon about a year before he died. He told me that while I was speaking, he was so wrapped up in listening to the message that he entirely forgot I was speaking.

I think my Dad was similar to most who have ever lived, especially those who have lived in a Western nation where Christianity is the dominant religion. He was confused by what he thought were conflicting realities. To him, what God is doing was an unfathomable mystery.

The "Christian" world little understands the nature of God's purpose. Even though my father's family was more than nominally involved in evangelical Protestant religious pursuits, they provided no satisfying answers to his searching questions about the intensity of suffering and why it even existed. They only answered that the cause was sin. Most assuredly, they could not provide even one iota of truth about those who died without accepting Jesus Christ as Savior.

Rivers of Living Water

But the Bible does not leave us without a clear insight into both their present and future state. John 7: 37-39 provides a scriptural platform on which we can expound a very exciting and beautiful doctrine of a merciful God.

On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, which those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

Giving meat in due season (II Timothy 4:2), Jesus preached about the meaning of the Last Great Day, and His subject was the Holy Spirit. Why? There is no doubt that some understood the meaning of the day because His audience had just witnessed the conclusion of a ceremony that involved water. God never commanded them to keep this ceremony, but nonetheless it contained a measure of true symbolism.

Each day during the Feast of Tabernacles, a priest drew an urn of water from the pool of Siloam and carried it through the Water Gate while the people recited Isaiah 12:3: "Therefore with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation." Once inside the city, they paraded the urn of water to the altar accompanied by a choir singing Psalms 113-118. To conclude the ritual, the priest poured the water on the altar as an offering to God.

However, on the last day, the great day of the Feast, they marched seven times around the altar before pouring the water. What does pouring water upon an altar have to do with salvation? How many understood the symbolism that day when Jesus spoke concerning the Holy Spirit? Had the symbolism become obscured in people's minds by the passage of time? Jesus' comment should have revitalized their understanding of this wonderful truth.

Psalms 118:19-29 is a part of what the choir was singing as the procession approached and circled the altar:

Open to me the gates of righteousness; I will go through them, and I will praise the LORD . This is the gate of the LORD, through which the righteous shall enter. I will praise You, for You have answered me and have become my salvation. The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This was the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day the LORD has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it. Save now, I pray, O LORD; O LORD, I pray, send now prosperity. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD. . . . God is the LORD, and He has given us light; bind the sacrifice with cords to the horns of the altar. You are my God, and I will praise You. . . . Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever.

This psalm exalts the theme of the Last Great Day. It depicts the time when the whole world will go through the gates of righteousness, recognizing Christ as Savior, rejoicing in those God sends to teach them and praising God for His mercy in giving them salvation. Though not directly stated in these verses, the only reason mankind will respond like this is because God will pour out His Holy Spirit on all of humanity!

Are the Unsaved Dead "Lost"?

The Last Great Day has a very special meaning to those who understand. It answers perplexing questions about the great masses of humanity who are living or have died without knowledge of God's way or a true understanding of Jesus Christ, the only "name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). In my thirty years as a minister, I have yet to talk with anyone from another church who knows the fate of these "lost" people.

Are millions lost because they never heard the name of Christ? What about infants who died? What about the billions enslaved under the dreadful yoke of atheistic communism? They did not choose to be born in a godless society. Are the doors forever shut on those born in a nation dominated by Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism or Islam? Most calling themselves Christian think so.

It almost seems as though Paul agrees with them when he writes:

Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands—that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. (Ephesians 2:11-12)

What a depressing status! If these verses stood alone, these "aliens" and "strangers" would indeed live their lives in vain. Without a future opportunity for salvation, they would truly be lost forever.

Could we call God merciful if He consigned people to hopelessness merely because of an accident of birth? Would He be fair to condemn those who never heard? God can do anything He wants. It is, after all, His creation. In verse 13, though, there is a slight crack in the door of hope: "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ." Everyone has stood in the Gentile's position of being far off from salvation. We have all had to be brought near by the blood of Jesus Christ. Could the only difference between us and them be a matter of timing?

Imagine the multiple billions who have lived through childhood unloved, uneducated and unhealthy in body and spirit. They may have endured miserable marriages, reared and lost children to disease, war and natural disaster. Others may have spent seemingly pointless lives growing old, neglected and disrespected as fodder for the next disaster.

The heaven and hell doctrines of this world's Christianity may make for interesting reading, but they render the judgments and resurrections of God as superfluous. They diminish the creative power of the great, merciful God in these areas as finished and past, not as ongoing and future.

God's Attitude

Paul gives us an insight into God's attitude toward all of mankind in I Timothy 2:1, 3-4, 6.

Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for *all men*. . . . For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires *all men* to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth . . . who gave Himself a ransom for *all*, to be testified in due time.

Three times in four brief verses God states He has planned for the salvation of all. Since He desires to save all men, they must all be given an opportunity for it. It is very obvious from human

experience that very few among all mankind have ever heard the gospel or come to the knowledge of the truth.

Verse 6 also says that Christ is a ransom for all, and this will be testified or witnessed of in due time. The way Paul wrote this shows that the testifying is still future. In other words, many had not heard of Christ's ransom for sin, and Paul indicates that he expected many then living and many yet unborn would also die without hearing of it. But it would be witnessed to all in due time because Jesus Christ is the only name under heaven by which men can be saved.

II Peter 3:8-9 reinforces this:

But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.

God's plan, humanly speaking, covers a long time. Like Paul, Peter clearly says that God does not desire anyone to perish. Other scriptures indicate that some will, but it is not God's will that they do so.

The critical factor in these verses is repentance. How can a person repent if he does not have knowledge of the truth, if he does not know the purpose God is working out, of what he should repent, why he should repent or by what means his sins are forgiven? The overwhelming majority of people who have ever lived on earth fit into this category! These things remain untestified to them.

I Corinthians 15:21-23 adds another important revelation to this mystery. "For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming."

Simply put, God is proceeding according to a plan. All die, but that same *all* will also be made alive, resurrected in a certain order according to God's plan. Verse 26 reads, "The last enemy that will be destroyed is death"—it has not yet been destroyed! This means that God's plan is still continuing, and in due time the opportunity for salvation will come to all, even though God must resurrect many to that opportunity. Most churches exclude most of this world from salvation because they are not part of their group. Why do people scoff when we point out that God will give all mankind the chance to conform to His image?

Krisis

Jesus explains in John 5:25-29 that there is more than one resurrection:

Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself, and has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.

To understand the resurrections, it is important to discern the meaning of the word *krisis*, variously translated "judgment" or "condemnation" (verses 22, 27, 29-30). According to *The Complete Word Study Dictionary* by Spiros Zodhiates, *krisis* generally means "separation," "decision," "division," "turn of affairs" and "judgment." *The Companion Bible* defines it as "a separating, a judgment, especially of judicial proceedings." Notice that it does **not necessarily** indicate the end of an affair.

A very clear similarity exists between the Greek *krisis* and the English "crisis." Crisis means "a turning point for better or worse" in the progress of an affair or a series of events. It is not necessarily the end, but a critical juncture, and the affair continues on. In this sense, *krisis* indicates a turn of affairs, a turning point, in a person's life. It may be the end, but, then again, it may be a time when his life takes a considerable turn for the better! Maybe God has, for the first time, revealed Himself and His purpose to him so he may be judged.

In the biblical sense, judgment can imply a period during which a process is ongoing. The decision, or sentence, comes at the end of the judgment. I Peter 4:17 shows this pattern in relation to the church. "For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?"

Here the word translated "judgment" is from the Greek *krima*. According to Zodhiates, this word derives from the same root as *krisis*, but in this case, it indicates the act of judging, that is, a process including the final decision or sentence. The Bible uses this word only in reference to future reward and punishment.

Again we have indications of an active process, not merely a final decision. The active process includes both what the Judge is doing (observing, evaluating; Psalm 11:4) as well what the judged are doing. A judgment cannot be made without both aspects. In I Peter 4:17, God is judging "the house of God" and "those who do not obey the gospel" within the framework of how they live their lives.

Peter says, "The time has come for judgment to begin," implying that judgment did not officially start until Christ founded the church. Now that it has begun, all mankind will eventually be included within God's judgment. The pattern for judgment is therefore being established in the church.

When we see the overall picture of God's purpose, we can better understand what occurs in a Christian's life. God calls and grants repentance. We are baptized, receive the Holy Spirit and are put into the church, where we begin to grow in the grace and the knowledge of Jesus Christ until we come to the measure of the stature of the His fullness. During this period of sanctification, God puts us through trials, and we overcome, producing the fruits of His Spirit. Sanctification prepares us for God's Kingdom and determines our reward.

Paul helps us understand this in Romans 5:1-5:

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which was given to us.

All of this requires time. It is not God's purpose merely to save us, but to bring us to His image so that we will be prepared for His Kingdom. Our God is a Creator. He is reproducing Himself in us. Like a wise parent, He is judging, evaluating what is best for our development, then putting us through the next step in that ongoing process until we inherit His Kingdom. This is a true understanding of a major portion of the doctrine of eternal judgment (Hebrews 6:2).

God's Spirit and the Last Great Day

Romans 5:5 says, "The love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit." Thus, we did not have the love of God until we had His Spirit. Without God's Spirit, we could not possibly keep His commandments, for love is "keep[ing] His commandments" (I John 5:3). If we cannot keep His commandments, God cannot create His character in us, and He will not allow us to enter His Kingdom. Therefore, anyone not having His Spirit will not be there.

At this point, we can return to the symbolism of the water-pouring ceremony in Jesus' time. Paul writes in II Corinthians 5:10, "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." If one does not have the Holy Spirit because God has never offered him the opportunity, he can only receive the death penalty. Why? Because he has no way of even coming close to keeping the commandments, especially in terms of truly loving God (compare Romans 8:7).

I Corinthians 2:11-12 adds:

For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him?
Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have
received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might
know the things that have been freely given to us by God.

Christians have been separated, made distinct, from the world. As a result, we have also been brought under judgment, because receiving the Holy Spirit enables us to know the things of God that have been withheld from the world.

Ephesians 3:3-5 confirms this:

. . . how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I wrote before in a few
words, by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of
Christ), which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been
revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets. . . .

At the foundation of this world, mankind was cut off from access to God and His Spirit. The water ceremony pictures a future time when mankind's contact with God is restored, and he will receive the Holy Spirit. Then, God will also judge him on the same basis as those privileged to have His Spirit now.

Humanity's Blindness Removed

Romans 11:25, 32 provide a major basis for God's judgments concerning salvation for those who have not yet received His Spirit.

For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that hardening [*blindness*, KJV] in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. . . . For God has committed them all to disobedience, that He might have mercy on all.

This applies not only to Israel but to all of mankind. Thus, when man was cut off from God through Adam and Eve's sins, he did not possess the most important tool needed to equip him for his part in God's purpose. So God made a merciful judgment on him based on his ignorance of or blindness toward God.

And mankind is still blinded. "But their minds were hardened [*blinded*, KJV]. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ. But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart" (II Corinthians 3:14-15). Mankind is still held in bondage to human nature, Satan and sin. Until God chooses to reveal Himself, the veil—the ignorance and blindness toward and enmity against God—remains.

It will not remain forever, though. God says in Romans 11:26, "And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: 'The Deliverer will come out of Zion, and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob; for this is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins.'" Many other scriptures state that God desires to save all of mankind, not just Israelites. Given the circumstances that have already occurred, and the criteria that must be met under the process of judgment, the only way God can save humanity is through a future resurrection.

The Second Resurrection

This will indeed occur!

And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them. . . . And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. But the rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years. (Revelation 20:4-6)

A first resurrection suggests at least a second. The verse clearly says the second occurs one thousand years after the first. That verse 6 states that death has no power over those in the first resurrection strongly indicates that death *will* have power over those in the second. The second resurrection, therefore, must be a resurrection to physical life. Verse 6 also repeats from verse 4 that those in the first resurrection will reign with Christ. This means that His government is established, functioning and executing judgment, among other things.

The events foretold in verses Revelation 20:7-10 occur at the end of the thousand years. Verses 11-12 occur immediately afterward and describe the second resurrection alluded to in verse 5.

Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great standing before God, and the books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books.

The apostle John saw people rising from the dead and experiencing the same kind of judgment we do now. For the first time, they are called of God, granted repentance, given His Holy Spirit and gain access to Him. They, too, must then overcome and grow into the image of God that they might be prepared to live and reign in God's Kingdom. Like us, God judges them against the things written in His Word. He also opens the Book of Life so new names can be entered. All these things do not happen instantly but over a period of time deemed sufficient by God to prepare them for His Kingdom.

Ezekiel 37:12-14 reveals what lies ahead for Israel, God's Old Covenant people:

Therefore prophesy and say to them, "Thus says the Lord GOD: 'Behold, O My people, I will open your graves and cause you to come up from your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. Then you shall know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves, O My people, and brought you up from your graves. I will put My Spirit in you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken it and performed it,' says the LORD."

The ancient Israelites, except for a few, never really knew the true God, nor did they ever have His Spirit. Ezekiel 37 describes in greater detail those things shown generally in Revelation 20:12.

God has not overlooked the Gentiles. In Matthew 12:41-42, Jesus confirms that they will rise in the same judgment, and therefore at the same time, as the Israelites:

The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here. The queen of the South will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and indeed a greater than Solomon is here.

Notice that Jesus calls it *the* judgment.

The Scriptures, without doubt, show a universal resurrection of all who have lived and died without ever having what God considers an opportunity for salvation. This resurrection will occur one thousand years after the first, and those resurrected will be given the time not merely to repent, but to come to know God.

They must come to know Him because Jesus says in John 17:3, "And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent." Eternal life is more than just endless life. It is endless life, *living as God lives*. It takes time and overcoming for us—and them—to learn to live like God lives. When we live as He does is when we know Him.

I cannot be sure what my father's thoughts were when he visited the Allegheny Cemetery. But I am sure he knew neither the true God nor His Son Jesus Christ. His time is yet ahead, and I for one want to be there to greet him.