

REVELATION 21:6-8

HELL IS THE DEFAULT DESTINATION!¹

“It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”²

Antoine Dominique (Fats) Domino Jr. died this week. As is almost always the case after the death of a popular entertainer or famous person, cartoonists pictured him playing piano in heaven and commentators suggested that he was now playing piano and singing in God’s celestial choir. In popular theology of western culture, except for a few universally detested characters, everyone goes to heaven when they die.

I enjoyed his music; I emulated his style when playing piano during my teen years. However, whether Fats Domino is in heaven is not my decision, and I’m glad for that. Certainly, I hope that Fats Domino is in heaven; if this is so, it is because of the grace of our Lord Jesus. I’m glad I don’t make this decision for others, because I know that I am unqualified to make such a determination; I hardly know my own heart. What I do know is that hell is the default destination for mankind. This is the reason God sent His Son to die for a condemned race.

Preachers of a prior generation were sometimes accused of being overly graphic, excessive in their employment of dramatic licence when speaking of eternity, especially when they preached about hell. If preachers from an earlier time spoke too often and with too much imagination about hell, preachers of this day have erred by moving to the opposite extreme, giving little warning of the consequences of a life in which God doesn’t count.

In our text, John has just described a stunning scene that unfolded before his wondering eyes. He wrote, “I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away’” [REVELATION 21:1-4].

When I conduct the graveside service as a saint of God is interred, I read these verses. The verses serve to remind those in attendance at that solemn hour of the promise of the Living God. Imagine! No more tears. No more “good-byes.” Death will have been banished forever. There will never again be a heart that sorrows. Never again will a child cry because her mother has been taken from her sight. Never again will a father weep because he can not again hold his child. There will be no more pain. The cripple will walk with firm step. The blind will see clearly. The deaf will hear. The dictionary will need to be rewritten so that words such as “death,” “sorrow,” “pain” will no longer be known.

¹ The title and the concept for this message was taken from an article written by J. D. Greear, (J. D. Greear, “Hell is the Default Destination,” March 20, 2017, <https://jdgrear.com/blog/hell-is-the-default-destination/#more-20622>) accessed 21 April 2017

² Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

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Then, in emphasis of what has just been proclaimed, the Word of God informs those looking forward to this day, “He who was seated on the throne said, ‘Behold, I am making all things new.’ Also, he said, ‘Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true’ [REVELATION 21:5].

John has provided a verbal picture of what most people assume will be their destination. It seems fair to say that popular mythology assumes they all people go to heaven when they die. Preachers make such statements at the funerals of noted musicians. People mew and purr that the one who died is now singing in God’s choir. Hollywood starlets and television personalities all go to Heaven, according to the popular view; God seems obligated to accept them because they are so adored on earth. Even when a notorious rake such as Hugh Hefner dies, commentators and reporters speak of their welcome into Heaven where we are assured that they have made a grand entrance.

Scripture, however, presents quite a different view. It is true that God created people for Heaven, but the rebellion of the human race, in which we all have participated, has destined us for hell. Hell, not heaven, is our default destination. This accounts for the warning Jesus gave: “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few” [MATTHEW 7:13, 14].

It will be to our advantage to know what Scripture says. We who are followers of the Christ need to know so that we may encourage our own hearts. Christians need to know what is written in order to be effective when warning those who are froward, those who are rebellious, those who are presumptuous. Outsiders must know what is written so that they are warned against presuming against God’s grace. Being warned, perhaps they will turn to the Saviour and receive the gift of life which is promised to all who look to Him. Thus, this message is presented for the benefit of all who may hear.

GOD IS IN CONTROL — “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end” [REVELATION 21:6a]. If all we had to go on were the decisions made by politicians and governmental bureaucrats, an assumption of social chaos reigning would appear reasonable. Chaotic and contradictory affirmations from politicians coupled with wild statements uttered by the rich and powerful make it well-nigh certain that any reasonable person will be convinced that the inmates are running the asylum. However, the Christian may be assured that God is in control. Should you begin to imagine that the world is plunging into chaos, read the Book of the Apocalypse. Note that our text begins with God’s assertion that He is in control of all that is taking place. God says, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.”

This divine affirmation is not some novel statement, invented to assuage faint-hearted saints only after the Saviour had ascended into the Glory. Long years before John was exiled, Isaiah heard and recorded the divine declaration, “I am the LORD,” no less than fifteen times. Among the affirmations of God’s power are these.

“Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer,
who formed you from the womb:
‘I am the LORD, who made all things,
who alone stretched out the heavens,
who spread out the earth by myself.’”

[ISAIAH 44:24]

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“I am the LORD, and there is no other,
besides me there is no God;
I equip you, though you do not know me,
that people may know, from the rising of the sun
and from the west, that there is none besides me;
I am the LORD, and there is no other.
I form light and create darkness;
I make well-being and create calamity;
I am the LORD, who does all these things.”

[ISAIAH 45:5-7]

“Thus says the LORD,
who created the heavens
(he is God!),
who formed the earth and made it
(he established it;
he did not create it empty,
he formed it to be inhabited!):
‘I am the LORD, and there is no other.’”

[ISAIAH 45:18]

Because the God we know and serve is Creator, and because all power is in His hand, with the Psalmist, the child of God can confidently assert:

“I trust in you, O LORD;
I say, ‘You are my God.’
My times are in your hand;
rescue me from the hand of my enemies and from my persecutors!”

[PSALM 31:14, 15]

It is a somewhat facile argument for a Christian to say that God is in control in a general sense; however, when our immediate world seems to be spinning out of control, we often begin to question whether God knows what is happening. Though we would never say that a child of God will not suffer injury or pain, we have doubts when our own lives are affected by the vicissitudes of life. In a previous message, I spoke of pressures Christians experience.³

Generally speaking, Christians in Canada are vaguely aware of the suffering of fellow believers in distant lands; we may even pray in a perfunctory manner for suffering saints. However, we tend to relegate our own suffering to such matters as a power outage, a failure to receive a raise in pay, an unexpected medical diagnosis. The difference between us and suffering saints in distant lands is that they suffer because of who they are, and we focus on personal inconvenience such as anyone might experience. When we complain in this fashion, we are questioning whether God is actually in control of our lives.

³ Michael Stark, “Certainties: What We Learn from Creation’s Groaning,” 2017 10 22, sermon, <http://newbeginningsbaptist.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Romans-08.18-25-What-We-Learn-from-Creations-Groanings.pdf>

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If we accept that God is Creator, it is an easy thing to believe that He reigns over life. Though we imagine him to be almost superhuman, Moses was a mere mortal, just as we are. When God appointed Moses, you may recall his initial response. Moses demurred, imagining every possible excuse for why he couldn't serve God. Even after the LORD had given him authority to perform various miracles, Moses sought to excuse himself from serving God. When Moses attempted to excuse himself once again, saying, "Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue" [EXODUS 4:10], the LORD rebuked him, saying, "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak" [EXODUS 4:11, 12].

Listen to this powerful assertion of the Psalmist:

"Understand, O dullest of the people!
Fools, when will you be wise?
He who planted the ear, does he not hear?
He who formed the eye, does he not see?
He who disciplines the nations, does he not rebuke?
He who teaches man knowledge—
the LORD—knows the thoughts of man,
that they are but a breath."

[PSALM 94:8-11]

Indeed, in heaven, before the rainbow-circled Emerald Throne of God, the redeemed of God will "fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They [will] cast their crowns before the throne, saying,

"Worthy are you, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created."

[REVELATION 4:10, 11]

Among the final things earth-dwellers will hear will be the voice of an awesome angel, declaring, "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water" [REVELATION 14:7]. There are no evolutionists in Heaven or in hell. All mankind will be convinced of God's might and power when He calls the world to account.

THE HERITAGE OF BELIEVERS — "To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son" [REVELATION 21:6b, 7]. Who are the thirsty, to whom the Living God promises a water that quenches? Who are those who conquer, who are promised a divine heritage? God addresses these people, promising them that which man cannot even imagine. The answers to these questions are provided by looking at several portions of the Word.

The promise of quenching the thirsty soul is a common theme throughout the Word of God. For instance, Isaiah has penned what is a readily recognised verse that promises,

“Come, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and he who has no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.”

[ISAIAH 55:1]

In the Beatitudes, Jesus pronounced a singular blessing, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied” [MATTHEW 5:6]. This particular blessing anticipated Jesus announcement loudly proclaimed in the days leading up to His Passion. “On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, ‘If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, “Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.”’ Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified” [JOHN 7:37-39].

Perhaps you will recall the account of Jesus’ interaction with a woman from Samaria. The account is found in John’s Gospel. “A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, ‘Give me a drink.’ (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, ‘How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?’ (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, ‘If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, “Give me a drink,” you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.’ The woman said to him, ‘Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.’ The woman said to him, ‘Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water”’ [JOHN 4:7-15].

It is instructive to note that the final offer extended in the Word of God is an invitation to the thirsty. “The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price” [REVELATION 22:17].

Thus, we can account for those who thirst, knowing that God will fulfil their longings. This is especially true since they long for righteousness and for the presence of the Living God. Therefore, God will fulfil their longings, and they shall be satisfied. This truth is captured in the hymn “Satisfied.”

All my lifelong I had panted for a drink from some cool spring,
That I hoped would quench the burning of the thirst I felt within.
Hallelujah! I have found Him Whom my soul so long has craved!
Jesus satisfies my longings, through His blood I now am saved.⁴

⁴ Clara Tear Williams, “Satisfied”

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What of those who conquer? Of whom does the Lord God speak? Remember the promises the Risen Saviour made in the earlier chapters of this book? As the Master addresses the Church of Ephesus, He says, “To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God” [REVELATION 2:7b]. The context of the promise is that these saints were challenged to adhere to the doctrine of the Apostles, though they were beginning to maintain the Faith in a perfunctory manner. They were losing the heart of the Christian life, which is to act with love. Still, they refused to concede to error; and for this they were commended by the Risen Lord of Glory.

The Church in Smyrna is encouraged, “The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death” [REVELATION 2:11b]. The context in this instance is faithful service, even to the point of death.

The congregation of the Church in Pergamum received this promise from the Lord Christ, “To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it” [REVELATION 2:17b]. The context in which this conquest is noted is in faithfully standing and especially in holding those deviating from the Faith accountable for their actions. Tolerating evil ensures God’s judgement; we must conquer, refusing to concede to wickedness in our midst.

The assembly in Thyatira also received a promise. The Lord of Glory promised, “The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father” [REVELATION 2:26, 27]. The context in which this promise is issued is holding fast, even when the majority have moved toward idolatry.

The congregation in Sardis likewise received a message of encouragement from the Living Saviour. “The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels” [REVELATION 3:5]. The conquest in this instance is in the context of those who maintain purity, who do not turn in bitterness from the assembly of the faithful, who continue to seek to build others rather than focusing solely on themselves.

The Church in Philadelphia were also encouraged by the Risen Son of God. “The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name” [REVELATION 3:12]. Conquering in this instance revolves around patient endurance, through seizing the opportunities which the Spirit presents.

There is a final instance of conquering that brings with it a divine promise. The Son of God promises the Laodicean Church, “The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne” [REVELATION 3:21]. Even in the midst of certain judgement, the Son of God promises grace and reward for those who accept His divine rebuke. It is through opening the door to the Living Lord of Glory that this promise is fulfilled.

Perhaps you are tempted to despair, tempted to say that you cannot conquer such mighty foes as those you face in this fallen world. You know your weakness, you are aware of your own failings. What we need is divine encouragement; and that is provided as we hear the Word, “Everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God” [1 JOHN 5:4, 5]?

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Remember this earlier word from the Apostle of Love? “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already. Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. They are from the world; therefore, they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error” [1 JOHN 4:1-6].

Permit me to look at one final word of encouragement to conquer, to overcome. John states the purpose of this brief book we have received as First John. He writes,

“I am writing to you, little children,
because your sins are forgiven for his name’s sake.
I am writing to you, fathers,
because you know him who is from the beginning.
I am writing to you, young men,
because you have overcome the evil one.
I write to you, children,
because you know the Father.
I write to you, fathers,
because you know him who is from the beginning.
I write to you, young men,
because you are strong,
and the word of God abides in you,
and you have overcome the evil one.”

[1 JOHN 2:12-14]

Our conquest is sure, though it is not yet complete. It shall be complete at Christ’s return, for He shall put down all rebellion. Blessed be His Name! With the Apostle to the Gentiles, we exult, “In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us” [ROMANS 8:37].

OUTSIDERS — “As for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death” [REVELATION 21:8]. This is the dark portion of what is written. It is dark because we don’t want to think of the consequences of a life lived without regard for Holy God.

Take note of the breadth of those who are described as going to hell. Included in the list John has penned are individuals we would expect to be included— murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers and idolaters. Most of us have no difficulty understanding that “really bad” guys will be in the lake of fire. Oh, we may quibble at applying the biblical understanding that hatred of our brother equates to murder or attempt to justify our own particular proclivity toward sexual immorality, but in general, we can agree that “really bad” people will be in hell. However, did you notice that the list John wrote also includes a lot of people who could be found in almost any church? For instance, John saw:

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- The **cowardly**—people who would never stand for Jesus in front of their friends
- The **faithless**—people who went to church but never really trusted God enough to obey him with their relationships or their money
- **Idolaters**—people who wouldn't put God first in their lives
- **Liars**—people who came to church but whose submission to God was not sincere

When I speak of that awful place called “Hell,” I know I am warning some church members. People may laugh and say, “All my friends will be there,” but, there is no joy in that awful place. Jesus speaks of Hell as a place of eternal torment. It is a solemn thought that all of us, no matter our race, our nationality, our sex, our educational status, our stature before other mere mortals—all of us deserve nothing better than being banned to that dreadful place. Thinking of that frightful destination, I think of the response of Charles Spurgeon as he declaimed on the dark subject, “Beloved, these are such weighty things that while I dwell upon them I feel far more inclined to sit down and weep than to stand up and speak to you.”⁵

The images described in Revelation are terrifying—unquenchable fire and burning sulfur. Some would argue that the language is metaphorical, but even if that is true and these flames are symbols, whatever it is to which they point is dreadful beyond comprehension. Moreover, the Bible is very clear that this is an eternal torment. None less than the Son of God Himself speaks of this as “eternal punishment.” The hymns of a bygone era addressed this fearful prospect.

“O there will be mourning
 Before the judgment seat,
When this world is burning
 Beneath Jehovah's feet.

“Friends and kindred then shall part,
 Will part to meet no more;
Wrath consume the rebel's heart,
 While saints on high adore!”⁶

It is not uncommon to hear those who know they are under sentence of death question God's judgement. They may ask, “How is it fair that God should send me to Hell. Where is the fairness of punishment for eternity for only seventy years of sin?” The issue is not the sin itself; after all, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” [**ROMANS 3:23**]. At issue is not some particular sin or even the degree of sin; rather, the issue is the One against whom we have sinned. If your sin was against a mere mortal, it would not be worthy of eternal punishment. If your sin was against an entire nation, it would not merit eternal judgement. However, we have sinned against the Living God. Because our sin is against the Eternal God, it takes on a far greater significance than that against another created being. We have violated the holiness of Almighty God. Thus, we bring upon ourselves eternal judgement—separation from His love and from His mercy for all eternity.

⁵ C. H. Spurgeon, “The Final Separation,” in **The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons, vol. 21** (Passmore & Alabaster, London 1875) 283

⁶ “The Judgment Seat,” (hymn) in **Spiritual Songs for Social Worship: adapted to the use of families and private circles in seasons of revival, to missionary meetings, to the monthly concert, and to other occasions** (1835) 138

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J. D. Greear provides clarification when he writes, “Sin gains its wickedness by the one it’s committed against. If you punch a hole in a wall, you have to pay for the wall. If you punch a dog, that’s worse. If you punch the woman behind you in the grocery line, you’re going to jail. If you approach the Queen of England with your fists raised, something worse than jail may happen to you. Sin against an infinitely holy God is infinitely wicked.”⁷

Holy God cannot overlook sin; He is just, and justice demands restitution. Every individual has a desire for things to be put right; however, it is evident that few want to include themselves in being made right. We want justice, so long as it doesn’t transform us. However, God shall restore justice to His creation. This accounts for the promise I cite week-by-week, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and thus has righteousness and with the mouth one confesses and thus has salvation” [**ROMANS 10:9, 10 NET BIBLE**]. Righteousness is restored for the individual who is born from above; righteousness for all creation will be restored at the time Christ the Lord “delivers up the Kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power” [see **1 CORINTHIANS 15:24**].

This is a reminder that God has done what was required. Either we pay for our sin by being banished from the presence of the Living God for all eternity, or we accept that another has received in Himself our punishment. You see, the holy Son of God accepted my place, receiving in Himself the Father’s sentence of separation. Hanging on the cross, the Lord Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me” [see **MATTHEW 27:46b**]? It is divine mystery how the Son of God provided an infinite sacrifice because of my sin; yet, He has set me free from sin. And that sacrifice is sufficient for you, as well.

If one refuses God’s gracious offer, what more can God do? He has provided the means for sin to be put away; the sinner can be made righteous, in Christ. The Lord God has provided a way for sinful man to be purified, to be accepted as a child of God. If we refuse to accept what God has offered, what more can He do? In “The Great Divorce,” C. S. Lewis has written, “There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done.’ All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. Those who knock it is opened.”

This is the final invitation each sinner will hear as they pass into an eternity without Christ and without love: “The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price” [**REVELATION 22:17**]. It is the Spirit of God pleading through the Bride of Christ that even now pleads with sinners to receive life. With the Apostles we plead, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” [**ACTS 16:31**].

The invitation we offer is drawn from the Word of the Apostle Paul. “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. One believes with the heart, resulting in righteousness, and one confesses with the mouth, resulting in salvation... Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” [**ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13 CSB**]. This is our invitation to each one who will receive it. Surely, this invitation includes you. To each one who is willing to receive Christ as Master over life, do it now. Amen.

⁷ Greear, *ibid.*