

the

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“Do the work of an Evangelist” - 2 Tim 4: 5

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Peace on Earth

by the Rev. Archimandrite Fr. Eusebius Stephanou, Th.D.

When the angel announced to the shepherds: “Peace on Earth, good will towards men”, the people of Bethlehem heard the first proclamation that the Prince of Peace had stepped foot on the planet.

Though Israel would soon go through a complete destruction at the hands of the Romans, the promise of true Peace remains elusive some 2000 years later. Nevertheless, it is a promise of God which will eventually be fulfilled. The following article is a sample of some of Fr. Stephanou’s thoughts regarding the soon approaching Kingdom of Heaven, which “*shall have no end.*” Sincerely, *Joseph Abbate*

Here I want to consider primarily the subject of Heaven. We tend to toss the term around rather loosely in our religious exchanges. Too many in our churches refer to Heaven without really understanding what Heaven is. When the subject comes up, we talk about Heaven with little, if any clarity concerning what specifically it is or where it is. There is so much ambiguity about whether it is a certain place and locality or whether it is a state of supreme blessedness, or is it both.

What Heaven Really Is

There may be some truth to the notion that Heaven is a definable place and location. There is scriptural evidence that supports such a belief. Heaven, however, is, first and foremost, a person, the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. It is His divine and glorious presence that makes Heaven what is, a place and state of the sum total of blessedness.

The word of God offers us a vivid description of a Christ-centered Heaven. “*For now we see through a*

glass darkly, but then face to face” (1 Cor. 13:12). The longing with which the believer lives his earthly existence is now completely fulfilled and answered. The appearance that he longed for has now become reality. Think of it! It should be an exciting destiny for the genuine believer. That’s what Heaven is all about. It’s very simple. It’s being united with Jesus in a dimension the human mind can hardly imagine.

The important thing to remember is our togetherness with Jesus. In the scriptural account of the predicted Rapture when Christ will return to catch away His remnant church, it is revealed that we will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. But what is particularly significant is how the verse ends: “*And so shall we ever be with the Lord*” (1 Thess. 4:16f). It is our everlasting union with Christ that we need to focus on. The bottom line is: that’s what Heaven indeed is all about.

Such an everlasting celestial union with Christ is essentially a Nuptial Union. Presently in this life the believer considers himself as betrothed to Christ. This betrothal relates to the stage of preparation leading up to the ultimate marital union between the Bride of Christ, the Church, and the Divine Spouse. The Apostle Paul speaks of the relationship between Christ and His Church in conjugal terms: “*Christ 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 to Himself a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish” Eph. 5:25f).

The aim of the believer is to be found clothed in a Wedding Garment in order to be admitted into the Wedding Chamber. Jesus warns us in the parable of the Marriage Supper that those who try to attend without the appropriate Wedding Garment will be “*bound hand and foot and will be cast out into outer darkness. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth*” (Matt. 22:2). **Our present betrothal stage is given to us for the purpose of seeking the Holy Spirit to perfect our Nuptial Love for our Celestial Lover.** Most of our churches, however, relate to Christ in an intellectual manner. The local church relates as a religious institution, rather than as a Bride intimately bonded with Christ as her Divine Spouse. Can you hear the warning of our Lord? “*I have something against you, because you have left your first love*” (Rev. 2:4).

Are you rejoicing from now and celebrating the joy of your wedding day, as the word of God exhorts us to do? “*Let us be glad and rejoice and give honor to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb is come and His wife hath made herself ready*” (Rev. 19:7).

The Kingdom Initially Internalized

The Kingdom of God begins on the inside of us. It consists of the attributes and nature of Christ. Saint Paul explains “*the Kingdom of God is righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*” It comes by reproducing the character of Christ within us. Before the Second Coming, the kingdom exists in the human heart. It has nothing in common with the kingdom of this world which is under the rule of the “*prince of this world,*”

Satan. The kingdom is initially internalized. It is the state of the soul. It is the image and likeness of God within us. When Christ lives in the believer, then truly the kingdom of God is within him. A mutual indwelling is basic: *“Abide in me, and I in you”* (John 15:4).

“Righteousness and Peace and Joy in the Holy Spirit” will be externalized with the return of Jesus in glory. At that time the Kingdom will become observable and tangible. What was purely spiritual and invisible and confined to the inside of us will now be visible and perceptible. The Kingdom, until now, heavenly, takes on the added dimension of the physical – the earthly.

Scripture reveals that Jesus will establish His Kingdom on earth following the consummation of the Marriage of the Church, the Bride of Christ, with the Divine Bridegroom. The righteous will be fresh out of the Wedding Chamber, rejoicing in a state of untold marital bliss.

Heaven: the New Garden of Eden

The disciples heard many teachings from their Divine Master about the Kingdom of God. They lived with the hope they would see the kingdom of David restored during their lifetime. But they were never told when exactly the kingdom would come. They felt they were in for one big disappointment in view of their Master’s imminent departure. Just prior to His Ascension they made a final attempt and asked their Master who had just foretold the day of Pentecost: *“Lord, wilt thou now restore again the kingdom to Israel?”* (Acts 1:6).

It is significant that in His response Jesus did not dismiss the notion of the long awaited earthly kingdom. Rather, He clarified that it was not for them to know the exact time or season when the kingdom would be restored. The appointed hour lies

with the sovereign counsel of the Father.

It is revealing that the idea of Christ reigning over an earthly kingdom was never questioned. Setting His kingdom upon earth signifies how the last Adam in effect continues the Garden of Eden where the first Adam left off. Satan was bent on thwarting the initial plan of God to make all of planet earth one grand Garden of Eden. But in Christ, the Creator ultimately fulfills His master plan.

It is this kind of reasoning we find in the writings of such pre-Nicene Fathers as St. Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, Hippolytus, Commodianus, Papias, Lactantius and St. Ephraem the Syrian. For them believing in the kingdom of God as an earthly kingdom was an elemental truth.

Some theologians and clergy in the Orthodox Church have a problem with an earthly kingdom. For them it is too crass and not becoming to the nature of God Who is a Spirit. In effect, however, what they are doing is denying the Incarnation. The assumption is that God at the close of the age will discard this old planet earth that is associated with so much human misery.

But God never trashes what He creates. Rather, He renews what needs renewing. Personally, I have no problem with the doctrine with an earthly reign of Christ. In Christ the physical world is sanctified and restored. **He will renovate planet earth and make it His everlasting dwelling place, indeed together with the Father!** It is very likely that Platonism of the Greek mind after the Constantinian period accounts for the vanishing popularity of the teaching concerning an earthly kingdom of Christ. Add, also, the increasingly entrenched view that the Christianized Greco-Roman Empire centered in Constantinople represented Christ’s Millennial rule on earth, predicted in

the book of the Revelation, chapter 20.

It is any wonder that the Orthodox Church did not show any enthusiasm over apocalyptic matters, following the cessation of the Pagan persecutors and the imperial reign of Constantine. The ultimate kingdom was already here! There was nothing further to look forward to. The sense of imminence and expectation was lost.

When Christ taught that *“My kingdom is not of this world,”* He was not necessarily rejecting the notion of an earthly kingdom. He meant that He was a king, anointed and endorsed by God, and not a king raised up of the will of man, as Caesar was and other kings that ruled the nations of the earth.

Zion: God’s Rest Forever

The evidence is overwhelming in scripture that Jesus, as the Messianic King, will not only rule over Israel, but all the nations of the world. As the successor of David, He will reign from the city of David, Jerusalem. And I am not speaking about Jerusalem which is above, but Jerusalem below on planet earth.

The prophet Micah foretells clearly that *“the Lord shall reign over the nations in Mount Zion from henceforth, even forever”* (4:7). He is referring to the Lord’s earthly dominion that will endure “forever.”

In Psalm 2:6 we read: *“Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion.”* It is repeated over and over again that Zion is the permanent dwelling place of the Lord. He has chosen Zion as His preferred habitation” Psalm 132:13). *“This is my rest forever. Here will I dwell, for I have desired it.”*

Jesus foretold that the gentiles would lie with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 8:11). The Land of Promise was to be inherited by them, since “in

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Abraham, all nations shall be called blessed.” Justin Martyr of the second century states: *“And along with Abraham we shall inherit the holy land, when we shall receive the inheritance for an endless eternity, being children of Abraham through the like faith”* (Dialogue with Trypho, 99).

Preparing for the Marriage Supper of the Lamb

The days in which we are living are days of preparation. The Church has been making herself ready since Pentecost day. But there is something more intense at the present time about her preparation for the return of Jesus. God is speeding up her readiness. The day of the coming Bridegroom is not very far off. There is a keen expectation in the air. Christians, as never before, are becoming excited about the imminence of the Marriage Supper of the Lamb.

This is not sensational apocalypticism, as some in the church would have us believe. The church that knows her divine Spouse lives that heightened sense of expectation today. It is not the result of some newly emerged school of theological thinkers. This phenomenon is the apocalyptic work of the Holy Spirit, consistent with His unfailing promise: *“He will show you things to come”* (John 16:13).

The business-as-usual attitude in the Orthodox Church will have to change. **The Church that is subject to Christ and obedient to the Holy Spirit waits longingly for that blessed day of His appearance.** As the Bride, she is making herself ready. No church can be vibrant, unless her life is one constant anticipation, especially in this day when planet earth faces mortal peril.

True that the church in this earthly life is espoused and betrothed to the immaculate Lamb, but she is not yet wedded to Him. The betrothal has been entered into and the promise given. But the execution as the marriage has yet to come to pass. The divine union in this marriage will be celebrated when our faithful Spouse comes to take His well-beloved Bride. But He is waiting for the bond of love that joins our hearts to Him to grow

stronger and warmer. How can it be truly eternally indissoluble if it has not reached its maximum intensity?

This is part of the Divine plan. The Father is making ready the church by inflaming her with an all-consuming love for Jesus. You cannot have a marriage unless those who are betrothed love each other. Love draws them to one another and causes them to desire each other, longing to come together on their wedding day. Jesus loves His bride, the Church, so much that He gave His life for her. But a love that leads to marriage is by necessity mutual. The attraction must be mutual. Jesus is infinitely desirous of our love. But He wants His Bride to love Him as much as He loves her. And here is



what is truly exciting. No sooner the Marriage Supper of the Lamb finishes, the saints will follow Jesus on His descent to planet earth (Rev. 19:14).

Yet, God will deal in wrath with those in the church who will not accept this measure of love that He is pouring into the hearts of His people. The Lord had a stern warning for the church of Ephesus at the turn of the first century for allowing her love to wax cold: *“I have somewhat against thee, because thou has left thy first love”* (Rev. 2:4).

The Church far too long has been lukewarm. But God is changing this condition of His people. He will not put up any longer with a church that is mediocre, tepid and indifferent.

Jesus promised: *“I will come*

again and receive you unto myself, that where I am, there you may be also” (John 14:3). O’ how much Jesus loves us! The believer who has been saved through the blood of Calvary’s Cross is destined to be with Jesus eternally. He loves us that much. He suffered and died not only to save us from condemnation and Hell, but that He might make us His own and have us live with Him throughout eternity!

“Ye are not your own” (1 Cor. 6:19). We do not belong to ourselves. We are under the ownership of God. We are Christ’s. We belong to Him and wherever He is we also will be. We will be inseparable from Him.

Jesus is coming to receive us unto Himself, so that where He is, we will be also. If He is in glory, we also will be in glory. If He is in the highest position of the universe, we too will be lifted up to that same exalted place. We will sit together with Him in Heavenly places. What a glorious promise!

Are you ready, dear reader, to hear the voice of the Archangel and the last trump of God? Are you part of that church that will be snatched away *“in the twinkling of an eye”*? What a thrilling day that will be when those truly “born of God” who love Jesus will be raptured, that is, caught up “to meet the Lord in the air.” St. Paul confirms the promise of the Lord Jesus Christ: *“And so shall we ever be with the Lord”* (1 Thess. 4:16f).

The hearts of God’s people are being prepared by the Holy Spirit. The function of the Holy Spirit is to enthrone Jesus in the hearts of God’s sons and daughters. His mission is to glorify Jesus and to ignite hearts afire with love for Jesus. Already we see how the Holy Spirit is animating souls and quickening hearts with a love for Jesus, unparalleled in the history of the Church.

Jesus is coming for a loving Bride – a Church that loves Him and not only confesses Him. Christians can no longer content themselves with faith – with confessing the Nicene Creed. Intellectual assent to doctrines is no substitute for a love relationship with Christ. At one time close intimacy with Jesus was

thought of as appropriate to certain “mystics” who had a special bent for that kind of experience but not viewed as normal for the cross-section of the church.

Entering into the Bridal Chamber

The Church expresses the expectation of the Bride more in individual terms rather than collectively as the body of believers. Each soul is the Bride of Christ, as well as the Church as a whole. The urgency of getting ready is accentuated during the sequence of services throughout Holy Week. The need for vigilance and preparedness is a basic theme permeating the week of Passion. The believer is placed in the position of recognizing his inadequate preparation and is heard to cry out to Jesus in song: “I see Thy bridal chamber adorned, O my Savior, and I have no wedding garment that I may enter therein; O giver of light, make radiant the vesture of my soul and save me!

The Heavenly Marriage is about to take place. Are you ready to receive the Bridegroom? He will come when you least expect Him. In the parable of the marriage supper (Matt. 22:1f) the warning is stated distinctly by the Lord that those who normally should be properly attired for the heavenly supper, but are not will be meted out with a frightful punishment: *“Friend, how did you come here with no wedding garment? And he was speechless.... For many are called but few are chosen.”* Are you dressed for the occasion? Don’t you see friend that your eternity is at stake? You could lose Heaven and spend all eternity in outer darkness.

The baptized members of the Church are the ones who are honored and invited by God to the marriage of His Son. When a distinguished host invites you to dinner, you feel honored. The honor of being invited by the soon coming King of kings is without comparison.

The message of the Orthodox Church is the message proclaimed by Holy Scripture. It is the warning of God to His people and His call to repentance: *“Behold, the Bridegroom cometh in the midst of the*

night, and blessed is that servant whom He shall find vigilant and again unworthy is the one whom He shall find indolent. Beware, therefore, O my soul, lest thou be borne down with sleep, lest thou be given up to death, and lest thou be shut out of the Kingdom.”

You cannot expect to meet the Lord in the air and to always be with Him simply by contenting yourself with your church membership and your baptism. Baptism and Communion without a passionate love for Jesus can only secure your damnation. “Many are called but few are chosen.” The Orthodox teaching is evident in the lyrics of many of her hymns. In the Holy Tuesday Matins, for example, we find the following supplication: “Number us, O Christ the Bridegroom, among the wise Virgins. Unite us with Thy select flock, and have mercy upon us. Amen”

Love Him! Don’t just believe in Him. Let us love the Bridegroom! The few who make up the small holy remnant are those who are in love with Jesus. They meet the most important qualification for sitting at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb – a passionate love for the Divine Lover. It is the basic condition for the nuptial union.

Jesus will not return to receive unto Himself a bride which is frigid. He is coming for a spouse that is consumed with a love for Him. That holy love begins in this earthly life, but is perfected beyond the grave. The Holy Spirit casts burning coals upon the heart to inflame it to the exercise of love towards the Savior. The capacity of receiving and enjoying His love increases within us. We are able to say: *“His left hand is under my head, and His right hand doth embrace me” (Song of Solomon 2:2).*

Good News for the New Year

The Board of Directors of Saint Symeon Ministry appreciate all of your support and prayers. For many of you, you had assisted Fr. Stephanou for decades, and we can’t thank you enough for your love and devotion for Jesus Christ and His Gospel. It is only through

the proclamation of the Good News of the Holy Scriptures that lives can be impacted and strengthened during these difficult times.

Just in the past few years we have witnessed such upheaval and violence in the world, yet, we do not have to fear these times because we know the final outcome. Jesus promised *“I am with you always, even unto the end of the age” (Matt, 28:20)*. And again, *“In this world you will have trouble, but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world” (John 16:33)*.

This is why getting the Gospel out to the world is so important. So please be sure to tell your friends about the available video and audio messages of Fr. Stephanou. You may find the videos by going to our website www.stsymeon.org and clicking onto the **“VIDEO MESSAGES”** section at the top of the homepage. To hear our audio messages, just type in **MINISTRY OF FR EUSEBIUS STEPHANOU** on Apple podcasts, Google podcasts, Spotify, Anchor, Overcast, Pocket Casts and RadioPublic.

We are grateful to Charles Abbate, who converted the old Logos Outreach Television broadcasts to digital media on Youtube, and Michael Beshonges who has converted the messages to audio digital format to be heard on so many podcast carriers. The painstaking work to sharpen up the visual film and sound recordings have been truly remarkable. Just think that many of these recordings are over forty years old. To quote Michael Beshonges: *“These podcasts honors the blessed memory of Archimandrite Fr. Eusebius Stephanou who ministered the word of God tirelessly throughout his ministry for evangelism and renewal in the Orthodox Church. Through publications, broadcasts and homilies, his teaching and Gospel preaching continue to strengthen believers throughout the earth. These podcasts presents **“The Logos”** evangelistic broadcasts released in the 1970’s and 1980’s on television and radio and the conference messages by which Fr. Eusebius taught the truths of the Bible and the life of Christian discipleship in the power of the Holy Spirit.”*