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 Bernard Bell  
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# DEATH OF DEATH AND HELL'S DESTRUCTION

SERIES: *THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN*

Jesus is once again in the news. Ten days ago *The Jesus Family Tomb* was published, a book in which the two authors claim to have discovered just that.<sup>1</sup> Jesus, they say, married Mary Magdalene and they had a son, Judah. There's nothing new in that assertion. Long before Dan Brown did so in *The DaVinci Code*, people have been claiming that Jesus married Mary Magdalene. But these authors go further: they claim that ossuaries (bone boxes) found in 1980 in a tomb at Talpiot, in the southern suburbs of Jerusalem, were used for the remains of Jesus and his family: his mother, his wife and his son. A film was made to accompany the book, directed by the principal author and with James Cameron (*Titanic*) as executive producer; last Sunday *The Lost Tomb of Jesus* premiered on the Discovery Channel.

The story has caught the imagination of the cartoonists. Cameron Cardow of the *Ottawa Citizen* speculated that the filmmakers had also found the bones of the family dog and cat.<sup>2</sup> Last week-end another of his cartoons ran in the *Mercury News*: "The skeptics last week... 'Jesus never even existed!' This week... '...and they just found his tomb in Jerusalem.'"<sup>3</sup>

Last Wednesday's *Mercury News* contained a full-page ad from Dick Bernal of Jubilee Christian Center denouncing James Cameron for his lies. The blogosphere has been buzzing with denunciations from many scholars, including those whose work is used in the book and film.

On the other side, N. T. Wright, a highly respected New Testament scholar, recently wrote a 800-page, scholarly defense of the resurrection, in which he argues that it is difficult to explain how the church got going if there was no resurrection.<sup>4</sup>

What happened to Jesus? Do we affirm with the Creed that Jesus Christ "was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; he suffered and was buried; and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father." Or did Jesus' bones end up in a box after he had married and had a son? Was the resurrection just a hoax?

In the mid-50s the church in Corinth struggled with the matter of the resurrection. In our Scripture reading this morning Paul told the Corinthian church,

**If there is no resurrection from the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God... If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. (1 Cor 15:13-16 NIV)**

Are we the victims of an ancient hoax? Are we to be pitied more than all people? Has my preaching these past few weeks been in vain? This was a major concern for Paul, for he devoted a long chapter to it. At the beginning of his argument he states,

**For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he**

**was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. (1 Cor 15:3-4)**

Why is the resurrection important? This isn't just some academic debate about a dry, abstract point of doctrine. Much depends on the resurrection of Jesus, as Paul told the Corinthians: the fate of Christians, whether alive or dead, the fate of God's enemies, and the fate of death itself. Two weeks ago we saw the centrality of the resurrection in the preaching of the early church from the very first day: repeatedly Peter proclaims "Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead" (Acts 4:10; cf. 2:36; 3:15; 5:30).

The death and resurrection of Jesus is central also to the book of Revelation. The key to history is the conquering lion who is the slain Lamb. Yes Jesus has conquered, but his path to victory lay through faithful witness, death, resurrection and enthronement. He is the only one who can open the seals on the scroll that contains God's purpose for the world; he is the one on whom history turns. Without the resurrection the scroll would not be opened.

I have been using the metaphor of an art gallery as we travel through Revelation. We are currently in the second last room of the gallery, a room whose theme is God's response to evil. Three paintings on the first wall (19:11-21) show his first response: he has appointed a great Savior, a strong deliverer who effortlessly cuts down God's enemies: the beast, the false prophet and the kings of the earth. Jesus is the conquering hero, but his path lay through death and resurrection.

Two paintings on the second wall (20:1-6) show God's second response to evil: Satan is bound, and God's people are being delivered from death to life. Jesus can deliver his people from death, from Satan's realm, because it is he, not Satan, who holds the keys of death and Hades (1:18). He holds these keys because he broke the bonds of death. Following the Lamb wherever he goes, the saints follow him through death to new life. Again the resurrection is crucial.

Today we come to the third wall on which hang two paintings showing God's third response to evil: he removes all evil from his world. The first painting shows the banishment of Satan, the second the banishment of both the dead and death itself.

## A. Banishment of Satan (20:7-10)

**When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth—Gog and Magog—to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore. They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the**

**false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.**

For a thousand years Satan has been bound and imprisoned in the Abyss. I argued that this binding took place through the life, death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus. Because Jesus has passed through death to life, he now holds the keys to Satan's realm of death and Hades. It is because of this victory that Satan has been cast down.

I take the thousand years to be a symbolic period, just as every other number in the book is symbolic. It is symbolic of a long and full period. After the thousand years Satan "must be set free for a short time" (20:3). Notice that little word "must" and the use of the passive voice. Satan is not sovereign; he is no longer master, even of his own realm. He was seized, bound and hurled into the Abyss; there was nothing he could do about it. Then he must be released; again there is nothing he can do about it. Who sets him free? It must be God. Repeatedly this little word "must" emphasizes the sovereignty of God. Repeatedly these "divine passives" emphasize that it is God who is control.

Satan is a deceiver, the master of lies, in whom there is no truth. He is the antithesis of Jesus who is faithful and true. It was to prevent Satan from deceiving the nations any longer that he had been thrown into the Abyss (20:3). When released, he returns to his old ways of deception. He deceives the nations throughout the world to gather them for a final assault on God and his people. These nations are identified as Gog and Magog. John here borrows imagery from Ezekiel who saw that "Gog, of the land of Magog, the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal" would advance against God's people, but fall under God's judgment (Ezek 38-39). Meshech and Tubal are in Anatolia; Gog is perhaps Gyges, king of the Anatolian kingdom of Lydia. But John has taken this imagery of Gog of the land of Magog and expanded it to be a metaphor for all nations gathered to make war against God's people. They go up against God's people, described in metaphorical terms as both a camp and the beloved city.

This is the fourth time that John has seen this final battle (16:14, 16; 17:14; 19:19; 20:7-9). In each vision the forces of evil gather together to battle God's people. I've argued that these are all the same battle, the eschatological battle between God and his enemies. Though this battle is eschatological, in that it is the battle of the last days, we should not put it off to some distant time yet future. We are in the last days, and have been since the decisive victory of Jesus the Messiah. God's enemies are constantly assaulting Christ and his people. The enemy seems powerful; here his army is as numerous as the sand on the sea shore. His victory seems certain.

But, but, but... We never actually see the battle being fought. God's enemies gather against his people, but they are immediately defeated (16:17; 17:14; 19:19; 20:9-10). In this case their defeat is accomplished by fire raining down from heaven, a frequent Biblical metaphor of divine judgment. In just a moment Satan is thrown into the lake of fire.

So we see that Satan is released from the Abyss only in order to go to his place of final judgment. The Abyss is his prison. Today prisons are used as places of judgment, where offenders serve the penalty for their offences. But in the ancient world prisons served a different purpose. They were holding places pending judgment. Paul was in prison in Caesarea and in Rome not as punishment for his crimes, but pending judgment by the Roman authorities. This is the function of the Abyss. Satan is held there pending his final judgment.

His release from prison is so that he might go to this place of final judgment, the lake of fire.

Why didn't God get rid of Satan much sooner? Satan is the ancient serpent who appeared in the garden to deceive Adam and Eve. God had entrusted the security of this garden to Adam, his earthly representative. Adam failed in this task, he failed to drive out this creature that mis-spoke God's word. Why did God allow the serpent to enter the garden? Why did he allow Adam to fail as guardian? Why did he allow Eve to be deceived? I don't know. I don't know why God allows evil in his world. The Bible gives little help in answering that question. But the Bible shows me very clearly what God is doing about evil.

Contrary to the serpent's assertion, but just as God had warned, death entered the world when Adam and Eve ate the fruit. They hid from God, but God was not content to let them hide from him. He called to them, and he immediately set limits around evil. God pronounced the serpent cursed, consigning him to futility and frustration, to a dead end. In the meantime God allows Satan to operate, but he is continually frustrating Satan's schemes, rendering them futile. This is what it means to be cursed: nothing works. It is the opposite of blessed, which means that life moves forward positively.

Furthermore, God told the serpent,

**"I will put enmity  
between you and the woman,  
and between your offspring and hers;  
he will crush your head,  
and you will strike his heel." (Gen 3:15)**

God would ensure that a son was born; Satan would try to prevent the birth of this son who would crush him. But because Satan is cursed, God would frustrate Satan's every effort. Yet in the visible realm it usually seems that evil has the upper hand: we see this in the early chapters of Genesis. But though God knew that humanity was desperately wicked, he put his rainbow in the sky; he made a covenant commitment to keep the earth going while he dealt with evil. Everything that has subsequently taken place is under the protective care of that rainbow. This includes all evil, every deception of Satan.

The son was born and to our surprise we find it was God's own Son. So widespread was evil that no son after the pattern of Adam could play the role required. Evil did its worst on this Son, the only one whom it did not control. Evil reached its greatest intensity when humanity rejected God's Son, killing him instead. God allowed this to happen, for even this was under the protective cover of his rainbow, his covenant with creation. God drew all evil onto his Son, allowed evil to focus its full intensity on him, but in so doing God broke the back of evil. Because there was no evil in Jesus himself, death could not hold him. God raised his Son to life in vindication. The Son burst the chains of death, of sin, of evil. He defeated Satan, taking from him the keys to death and Hades. The resurrection is central. With the death and resurrection of Jesus Satan has been cast into the Abyss, his prison where he awaits his final sentence.

The day is coming when God releases Satan from his prison to his final destiny, the dead end to which God's curse has consigned him. Such is the lake of fire, the place to which Satan is banished away from the presence of God.

These are the three major stages in how God deals with Satan. He cursed him, he sent his Son to defeat him by drawing all evil onto

himself, and finally he will remove him completely. In cursing him he assigned him to a dead-end, to frustration and futility. In defeating him in the cross and resurrection he has hurled him into the Abyss. In the end he will hurl him into the lake of fire.

Why has God chosen to do it in these three stages? I don't know; that's hidden in his inscrutable purposes. But what we can say is that it magnifies the grace of God expressed in his Son, and it magnifies the grace of God experienced by his people.

## B. Final Judgment (20:11-15)

**Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.**

John sees a throne, on which is seated one who is presumably God. Again John has borrowed from Daniel 7, where "thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat... The court was seated, and the books were opened" (Dan 7:9-10). The flight of earth and sky is an apocalyptic metaphor of the end, for this is the final judgment at the end of history.

Who must appear before this awful judgment throne? Four times John states that it is the dead who stand before this throne. These are "the rest of the dead" (20:5). Excluded from their number are those who have passed through the first death into the first resurrection. The faithful saints who die follow the Lamb through death into new life. Though they die, they do not stay dead; instead they live and reign with Christ (20:4), the Lamb whom they follow. The rest of the dead do not pass through to new life during the thousand years, nor after it. Instead they are brought before the judgment throne. This is the implicit second resurrection, a resurrection not to life but to judgment and death.

All the dead, both great and small, must appear before this throne: "no one is so important as to escape judgment, nor anyone so unimportant as to render divine judgment inappropriate."<sup>5</sup> The sea, death and Hades, all realms of the chaotic forces opposed to God, must give up their dead. Hades, or Sheol in the Old Testament, is the holding place of the dead pending final judgment. Just as Satan was released from his holding place, so are the dead released from theirs.

Ultimately every person will have to face God. Some will find this terrifying, others will find it glorious. For those who have lived their lives with their backs turned to God, the last thing they want to see is his face. At the opening of the sixth seal, "the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid... They called to the mountains and the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb'" (6:15-16). But for those who have lived their lives turned toward God, the sight of him is their great reward, the fulfillment of every longing: "They will see his face" (22:4).

Do you want to see the face of God? If you don't want to see it now, then you will have to face it at the judgment seat. If you want to see his face now, then you will not have to face it at the judgment seat, for you will pass into the New Jerusalem, there to see his face. C. S. Lewis writes,

In the end that face which is the delight or the terror of the universe must be turned upon each of us either with one expression or with the other, either conferring glory inexpressible or inflicting shame that can never be cured or disguised.<sup>6</sup>

As each of the dead is brought before the judge, two books are consulted: the book of deeds and the book of life. The book of deeds shows each one condemned. A glance at the book of life shows each name missing. All names are missing from the book of life, for each of those written in the book of life has passed through the first death to the first resurrection, and now lives and reigns with Christ; they never come before this judgment seat. Each of the dead is condemned by his or her own deeds. In the imagery of Revelation these deeds amount to allegiance and worship.

There are only two sets of people in the book. One group live their lives without reference to God. These are the earth-dwellers, living with no thought of heaven. They bear the mark of the beast and worship that which is false. Their city is Babylon and their destiny the lake of fire. Their allegiance is to the dragon and the beast. They pass from death to the second death. The other group live their lives with reference to God and the Lamb. On their foreheads they bear the seal of God and the Lamb, for they belong to him and are protected by him. They are on their way to their dwelling in heaven. Their city and destiny is the New Jerusalem. They pass through death to life beyond.

The lake of fire is the place of permanent removal from God's presence. Hell is an unpopular concept. How could a loving God send people to hell? I believe that the lake of fire was not intended in the first instance for people. It is the place of banishment for all evil: the dragon, the beast, the false prophet, the demonic powers, even death and Hades—"death of death and hell's destruction" as the hymn puts it.<sup>7</sup> It is the destiny that God had in mind when he cursed the serpent. It is Satan's dead end. But, tragically, there are people who would rather live without God. This is the tragedy of Cain: he went out from the Lord's presence (Gen 4:16). Here, outside the Lord's presence, the first city was built, the archetype of the great city, Babylon. The great city is the human city, the city of human construction, built away from God's presence. Its opposite is New Jerusalem, the city built by God, whose chief characteristic is that God is there. It is the city for those who long to live in God's presence.

In the end God gives people what they want: his presence or his absence. C. S. Lewis writes,

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.<sup>8</sup>

Why would those who have spent their whole lives avoiding heaven, ever think that they would find it an agreeable place to spend all eternity? Why would those who have turned their back on God all their lives find joy in living with him and seeing his face? In *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis imagines a bus tour by some residents of hell to heaven. They find heaven terrifying and quickly want to go back to hell. Lewis writes,

Earth, I think, will not be found by anyone to be in the end a very distinct place. I think earth, if chosen instead of Heaven, will turn out to have been, all along, only a region in Hell; and earth, if put second to Heaven, to have been from the beginning a part of Heaven itself.<sup>9</sup>

We so easily think of salvation, of the forgiveness of sins, as being just our ticket to heaven; now that we have our future settled, knowing that we have eternal life there, we can go back to living our same lives in the present. In Christ and through his Spirit, God gives us eternal life for the present; he gives us the life of the age to come to live in the present. He calls us to start living heavenly life now. The church, which is the community of God's people on earth, is a colony of heaven on earth. The life that the church lives is a foretaste of the life that will be lived in God's presence. As for the earth-dwellers, they live in a colony of the Abyss on earth.

There are two deaths, two resurrections and two destinies. The first resurrection and the second death are explicit. The second resurrection and the first death are implicit. The first death leads to the first resurrection; the second resurrection leads to the second death. The first resurrection is a resurrection to life, the second is a resurrection to death. The first resurrection is into New Jerusalem and the presence of God. The second death is into the lake of fire and the absence of God. Which do you want: the presence or the absence of God? Not as an insurance policy for the future, but right now. If you don't want God's presence right now, then you're hardly likely to enjoy him for eternity. But if you do want him now, he will satisfy you for all eternity.

Most people think of Revelation as a book full of judgment. But it is also full of the gospel of grace. At the end of the book is a wonderful invitation,

**The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life. (22:17)**

The bride is the church, God's people who have been given life; the Spirit is God himself speaking to and through the church; the one who hears is the one who has heard what the Spirit is saying to the churches. They are all calling for Jesus to come. They invite all to share in this longing: the water of life is freely available. But first you have to realize you are thirsty, and then you have to come. Do you share their longing? Do you long for Jesus to come? Do you want to see God's face? The good news of Revelation is that there is a book of life into which are written the names of those who follow the Lamb. Our names are written in there because of the cross and resurrection. Those whose names are written in that book will never have to face the opening of their book of deeds.

Here, then, we have God's three-fold response to evil: he has appointed a great Savior, this Savior is delivering many from death to life, and God will ultimately remove all evil, even death itself. Central to these is the death and resurrection of his Son, the conquering lion who is the slain Lamb.

But there is more: having delivered his world from evil, what does God do? There is a fourth wall in this room, on which hangs one more painting. "I am making everything new!" declares God (21:5). A great cry goes up, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (21:3). "It is done" (21:6). It is a painting of the new Jerusalem where God's people live in his presence. We'll look at this painting on our next visit to the gallery.

**One thing I ask of the LORD,  
this is what I seek:  
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD  
all the days of my life,  
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD  
and to seek him in his temple...  
My heart says of you, "Seek his face!"  
Your face, LORD, I will seek. (Ps 27:4, 8)**

1. Simcha Jacobovici and Charles Pellegrino, *The Jesus Family Tomb* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007).

2. Cameron Cardow, "Debunking Christianity," *The Ottawa Citizen*, February 27, 2007.

3. Cameron Cardow, "Skeptics," *The Ottawa Citizen*, February 28, 2007.

4. N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).

5. Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005), 516.

6. C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 34.

7. William Williams, *Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah* (1745, 1772).

8. C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), 74.

9. Lewis, *Great Divorce*, ix.