

A LIVING FAITH

for a

DYING WORLD

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Peter Watkins

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A LIVING FAITH

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1. WHERE YOU STAND

Are you content with the world as it is? If so, you need read no further.

Are you worried about the strife and the violence, the terrorists and the “muggers,” the wars, the inflation, the pollution and the immorality in the world today? If so, the following pages may give you the answer that you seek.

A True Story

Do you know the story of the destruction of Sodom? It was an act of God. It happened suddenly. Fire and brimstone poured down from heaven, and in an instant that city of hideous wickedness ceased to exist.

Before the destruction, God had warned the one righteous man who lived in Sodom to move, with his family, to a place of safety well away from the doomed city. Although Lot was a godly man, he felt no sense of urgency. It was difficult for him to grasp the fact that within a few hours that teeming, bustling city would be reduced to a heap of ashes. But he responded to the warning, and his life was spared.

If it was difficult for Lot to realise that destruction was imminent, it was impossible for his wife to do so. With reluctant steps she accompanied her husband out of Sodom, but in her heart she still belonged there. Longingly she looked back, and became part of the destruction.

This is a true story—and more. It is a warning of judgements to come. Like Sodom, our civilization is scheduled for destruction.

Although our civilization is doomed, we, like Lot, may be spared. The great question that will determine our destiny is: do we belong to the present civilization, or do we belong to the coming kingdom of God?

2. CHRISTIAN UNBELIEVERS

Do we belong to the present civilization, or to the coming kingdom of God? Do we belong to a system that is doomed to be destroyed, or to one that is destined to endure? Ultimately our own eternal destiny will depend upon the answer to this question.

Perhaps you are one of those people who are quite unmoved by stern words about judgements past and judgements to come? if you are, then this booklet is not for you. It's strange, though, that you should have read as far as this.

Some people—probably a larger number— would be more likely to pretend that they were not impressed. Bravely they would assert that they rejected both the story of the destruction of Sodom and the proposition that civilization was to be destroyed.

Fair enough! If this is how people like to see it, it would be difficult to persuade them otherwise. But two things should be made clear. First, it should be understood that refusing to face facts does not make the facts disappear. Many refused to believe that the “Titanic” could sink, but that did not prevent the proud passenger liner from going down on her maiden voyage.

The other thing that should be clearly understood is that those who adopt this negative attitude with regard to divine judgements are demonstrating that they cannot reasonably call themselves Christians.

Does someone protest that a man can be a Christian without believing everything that is written in the Old Testament? Ultimately, of course, it depends upon one's definition of the word “Christian,” but it is submitted here that the obvious definition is: a follower of Jesus Christ.

How wrong people are to imagine that they can reject the Old Testament and still be followers of Jesus Christ! It is an understatement to say that the Lord Jesus was a firm believer in the Old Testament. He made numerous quotations from the Old Testament; he stressed the importance of its teaching; he rebuked both those who neglected and those who rejected these Hebrew Scriptures. Here are some of the things that the Lord Jesus said about the Old Testament:

“Have ye not read ...?” (Matt. 19:4).

“Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures ...” (Matt. 22:29).

“If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.” (Luke 16:31).

“For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me: for he wrote of me. But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?” (John 5:46, 47).

“The scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35).

Jesus Believed the Sodom Story ...

Even more to the point is the fact that the Lord Jesus believed the story of the destruction of Sodom. Listen to his words:

“And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell: for if the mighty works, which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day” (Matt. 11:23).

“Likewise also as it was in the days of Lot; they did eat, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they builded; but the same day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven, and destroyed them all. Even thus shall it be in the day when the Son of man is revealed ... Remember Lot’s wife” (Luke 17:28-32).

The Lord’s emissary, the Apostle Peter, also spoke of the destruction of Sodom, and made this the basis of a stern lesson for future generations:

“... And turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes condemned them with an overthrow, making them an ensample unto those that after should live ungodly; and delivered just Lot, vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked” (2 Peter 2:6, 7).

... And He Warned of Judgements to Come

Let us not miss the main point. The Lord Jesus and Peter referred to the destruction of Sodom in a context concerned with another day of reckoning, it might be well to read the passages quoted above again, to see how clearly this thought is expressed. Indeed, the primary purpose of these scriptures is to give warning of judgements to come.

The Flood

The Lord Jesus also referred to another catastrophic judgement in the early history of the world—a much bigger judgement than that of Sodom and Gomorrah. This was the flood, when the earth was purged of its wickedness, and when nearly all its inhabitants were swept away. Jesus made this also the basis of a warning concerning judgements to come. Here are his words:

“But as the days of Noah were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be. For as in the days that were before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered into the ark, and knew not until the flood came, and took them all away; so shall a/so the coming of the Son of man be” (Matt. 24:37-39).

The Second Coming

Observe that both in Luke 17 and Matthew 24 the Lord links the world’s future judgements with his own second coming. But more concerning this later.

3. A DYING WORLD

The story of man's troubles begins in the Garden of Eden. Oh yes, the Lord Jesus also believed the story of Eden (See Matthew 19:4- 5), and all true Christians will do the same.

Dust

First, let us look at Genesis 2:7, where we have a summary of the facts concerning the creation of man:

“And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.”

Next, we note that our first parents were put on probation. Adam was told categorically that disobedience would be punished by death. Observe that death was to be a punishment.

“And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die” (Gen. 2:16, 17).

The account goes on to tell us that Adam and Eve did, in fact, disobey God's law, and were in consequence sentenced to death. The words of the sentence are significant:

“In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (Gen. 3:19).

Why should there be this reference to dust in the death sentence? We have already looked at Genesis 2:7—the passage about the creation of man. This provides the key. Man had been created from the dust: now he was to return to his native dust. He was to return to the state that obtained before his creation. He was again to become a heap of inanimate dust. Death was therefore to be a reversal of creation. Death was to be the opposite of life.

To ensure that the death sentence took effect, God expelled Adam from the Garden, and prevented him from having access to the tree of life. It was evidently God's intention that the condemned people should really die.

“Children of Disobedience”

Like begets like. As children of Adam, we too are sinners; and because we are sinners, we too are under sentence of death. And as with Adam, so with his children: death is real. This is the consistent teaching of Scripture. The following passages are just a sample of what the Bible is saying again and again. See how the very language of these passages, as well as their teaching, takes us back to Genesis:

“Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned ...” (Rom. 5:12). “Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help. His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish” (Psalm 146:3, 4).

“For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no pre-eminence above a beast: for all is vanity. All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again” (Ecclesiastes 3:19, 20).

The Shadow of Death

Life is brief and precarious. The only sure fact about human life is that it ends in death. Indeed, men are dying as they live.

For two reasons, therefore, the human outlook is a bleak one. As individuals, we see death looming before us; and as members of a rebellious race, we are confronted by the prospect of the destruction of our civilization we are dying creatures in a dying world.

There are significant indications that the destruction of civilization is very near. As far as we of the present generation are concerned, we cannot be sure which will come first. It could be the end of our own brief life, and it could be the end of civilization.

4. THE COMING KINGDOM OF GOD

Beyond the Gloom

Like Sodom, and like the civilization before the Flood, our civilization is scheduled for destruction. The immediate outlook is indeed a gloomy one, but for those who can see beyond the gloom, the prospect is glorious beyond compare. The end of one era marks the beginning of a greater.

It would be unfortunate if the statement about the destruction of our civilization were misunderstood. Let it then be noted, here and now, that the Bible does not teach that this planet will be destroyed. Indeed, we are given an assurance that the physical earth will remain, and that it will be inhabited. What the Bible does foretell is the destruction of civilization as we know it—and of necessity this will involve great loss of life.

It is God's intention to remove the kingdoms of men, and to establish in their place, upon this earth, a divine kingdom. The Lord Jesus is the appointed king, and he will return to fulfil this purpose. It need hardly be emphasized that Jesus possesses all the required qualifications for world rulership.

We have already looked at scriptures that speak of coming judgements. Now let us turn to the Bible for evidence of these further propositions. Here are the propositions and the proofs:

1. That the Physical Earth Will Not Be Destroyed

“And the Lord said ... As truly as I live, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord” (Numbers 14, 20, 21).

2. That the Earth Will Always Be Inhabited

“For thus saith the Lord that created the heavens; Cod himself that formed the earth and made it; he hath established it, he created it not in vain, he formed it to be inhabited: I am the Lord; and there is none else” (Isa. 45:18).

3. That the Kingdoms of Men Will Be Removed, and the Kingdom of God Will Be Established in their Place

“The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever” (Rev. 11:15).

4. That the Lord Jesus is the Appointed King

“He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: and he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end” (Luke 1:32, 33).

5. That the Lord Jesus Will Return to Reign

“He added and spake a parable, because ... they thought that the kingdom of God should immediately appear. He said therefore, a certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom, and to return” (Luke 19:11, 12).

6. That the Coming Kingdom of God will be Glorious

Isolated quotations do not do justice to this superb theme. Please open your Bible and read Psalm 72, Isaiah 2 and Isaiah 11.

Prophecies Fulfilled

Some might feel tempted to brush these predictions aside as wishful dreams. Such people would obviously be ignorant of the power of Bible prophecy. The Bible abounds with examples of predictions that have been fulfilled down to the most minute detail. Indeed, the whole history of the people of Israel, utterly unlikely as it is, has been written in advance on the pages of the Old Testament. In Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 28 and Jeremiah 30 and 31 it is foretold that the Jews would be scattered amongst the nations; that in the meantime their land would be desolate; that this scattered people would be mocked and persecuted; that despite their sufferings, the Jews would not be destroyed as a race; that ultimately they would return to their own land again. All these things have happened just as the Scriptures foretold, and in due course the prophecies concerning the coming kingdom of God will likewise be fulfilled.

The Issue that Confronts Us

The earth will be filled with God’s glory: but what will happen to us? The great question that determines our destiny has already been twice repeated. Do we belong to this civilization, or to the coming kingdom of God?

5. THE RULERS OF THE FUTURE AGE

“Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?”

This was Peter’s question, and the Lord’s answer is instructive:

“Ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt. 19:28).

So God’s faithful servants will be rulers in the kingdom to come—rulers under Jesus Christ, the great king. There are other scriptures that express the same truth. For example:

“Thou hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth” (Rev. 5:10).

Both the parable of the talents (Matt. 25) and the parable of the pounds (Luke 19) point to the same conclusion.

The Problem of Death

Immediately we are confronted with a problem. We have seen that the true followers of Jesus Christ will be invited to help him in the work of government in the coming kingdom of God. Yet most of these worthy people have died long since—Peter, for example, has been dead some nineteen hundred years —and the Scriptures teach that the dead are really dead.

Although this looks like an insuperable difficulty, those who have learned to trust their Bibles will be confident that the Bible provides an answer to this problem.

The Hope of Resurrection

The Scriptures do indeed teach that death is real. Without any act of divine grace, death is the end of man’s existence. But God is gracious, to those whom He recognises as His people, and to them is extended the hope of a life beyond the grave. The true Christian hope is resurrection.

Remember how the Lord Jesus was raised from the dead. He died, and his body was placed in a tomb. Then three days later he came forth from the tomb—alive. And he is alive to this day. Two mighty miracles were performed on that occasion: a dead man was restored to life; and the man who was called back to life was also made immortal.

In 1 Corinthians 15:20, we are told that the resurrected Christ is “the firstfruits of them that slept.” This means that what happened to Jesus Christ will happen to those who belong to him. A “harvest” of believers will be called forth from their graves to life and immortality.

In the same context we are told when the resurrection will take place:

“... Christ the firstfruits: afterward they that are Christ’s at his coming” (verse 23).

Clearly then the resurrection will take place when Jesus Christ returns to the earth.

Has anything occurred to you? We saw earlier that when Jesus returns he will be a king, and that his faithful followers will help him in the work of government. Now we have seen that Jesus’ true followers will be raised to life and immortality when he comes. The two thoughts are related. When the great work for which they are appointed is about to begin, true Christians will not only be brought back to the scene of action, but they will also be equipped with immortality.

“Those Who Are Alive and Remain”

Some of Jesus’ followers will be alive when he comes. Although these believers will obviously not need to be raised from the dead, they will experience a change of nature—a change from mortality to immortality. The apostle Paul expressed this thought when he said, “We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed” (1 Cor. 15:51).

We must beware lest, in our pursuit of detail, we lose our sense of wonderment concerning things that are truly wonderful. The return of Christ; the coming kingdom; the privilege of helping Christ in the government of the coming kingdom; the prospect of being made immortal: our minds are too small to grasp the marvel of these promises. Yet soon they will be realities.

6. CHRIST IS COMING SOON

Soon Jesus Christ will be on the earth again. The evidence for this startling proposition is so weighty that it is quite impossible to do justice to it in a booklet of this size. Consider, however, the following points.

The Old Testament presents us with a massive prophetic programme. Back in the days of ancient Babylon, the main course of history was foretold by Daniel the prophet (See Daniel ch2). It was foreseen that there would be four great empires, followed by a divided state amongst the nations, after which the kingdom of God would be established. The four great empires—the Babylonian, the Persian, the Grecian and the Roman empires—have come and gone; and since the fall of the Roman empire, in accordance with Daniel's prophecy, there has been a divided state amongst the nations of the world. Today the conflict between the nations has escalated to alarming proportions: and this brings us to the next point.

The Lord Jesus said that just before his return there would be “upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity ...men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth” (Luke 21:25, 26). Never has there been a time of distress and fear to compare with the present. Civilization is overshadowed by the bomb; and even if man were able to provide an answer to the bomb, there would still be the bleak prospect of starvation for the ever-increasing population of this plundered, polluted planet.

Meanwhile, human wickedness is reaching ugly dimensions. Profanity, immorality, dishonesty and violence have become almost normal. We have seen that this too accords with Bible prophecy and is a pointer to the fact that divine judgement is near. Remember that the days immediately before the second coming are compared by the Lord to the days of Noah and Lot, when there was a prevailing contempt for the laws of God.

Probably the most decisive sign that divine intervention is near is the return of the people of Israel to their land again. We have just looked at the Lord's words concerning those signs of his return—distress and fear. Immediately before speaking about these signs, Jesus said concerning the Jews:

“And they shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive into all nations: and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled” (Luke 21:24).

In other words, when the Gentile down-treading of Jerusalem should cease—when Jerusalem should become a Jewish city again—the times of the Gentiles would come to an end and the kingdom of God would be established. It was in 1967 that Jerusalem became a Jewish city again, after hundreds, nay, thousands, of years of Gentile domination. Time is running out!

Christ is coming soon.

The Immediate Prospect

Christ is coming soon. The kingdom of God is near. But even more near is the destruction of civilization. These are momentous days.

7. PERSONAL DECISION

Let the issue that confronts us be stated again, this time in slightly different terms. Either we cling to a dying world and perish with it, or we anchor ourselves to the great, eternal, invisible things associated with the kingdom of God, and endure with these enduring things.

Indecision

The way we decide will depend upon the strength of our conviction. The world is full of half-believers who dither pathetically between two clear-cut alternatives. Thus it was in the days of Elijah the prophet, who was constrained to confront Israel with the stark challenge, “How long halt ye between two opinions? if the Lord be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him” (1 Kings 18:21). Thus it was too when the Lord Jesus challenged the religious leaders of his day to resolve, once and for all, the question, “The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven or of men?” (Matt. 21:25); and again when he stated categorically, “No one can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon” (Luke 16:13). What this really means is that those who do not decide positively and resolutely to serve God have virtually decided against Him. God has no respect for those vague, sentimental people who profess a belief in Him and a respect for His Word, but make no spirited attempt to act like believers.

Decisive Questions

Here is a short series of questions. Let us answer each of them directly and courageously.

Is there a God?

If the answer is “Yes,” then the relevance of the next question becomes apparent:

Is the Bible a Message from God?

At this point many people start “hedging.” They are evidently nervous of the consequences of getting too deeply involved with God. They seem to be afraid that God will make unreasonable demands, and they will lose their freedom. So they start playing defensively. Some are willing to admit that the original scriptures came from God, but they add that there have been so many errors in transmission that we can place no reliance on the Bibles of our day. By saying this they are virtually accusing an all-wise God of such folly as even men would not be guilty of; and they are, at the same time, betraying a woeful ignorance of the history of the Bible text. Others say that the Bible is full of contradictions—though when one or two well-worn ones like, “Where did Cain get his wife from?” are disposed of, they usually suffer from embarrassing loss of memory. Almost invariably such people will admit, when pressed, that they are not qualified to judge because they have not even made one complete reading of the book they are criticising. Others argue that the Bible is at variance with science—though when asked to expound, all they can do is to refer to

certain theories held by some scientists that are at variance with Bible teaching. Apparently they do not know the difference between theory and fact.

The question was, “Is the Bible a message from God?” If the answer is “Yes,” as it ought to be, then the next question should not be difficult to answer:

Does the Bible Speak with Authority?

Indeed it does. If it has come from God it must be authoritative. So we proceed to the next question:

Does this authoritative divine message tell us that the kingdoms of men will be removed, and that the kingdom of God will be established in their place?

The answer is a decisive “Yes.” The evidence has already been supplied, and stands before us, testing our response.

The Way of Wisdom

The implications of all this are inescapable. We are in mortal danger. The only way to get real peace and security is by making our peace with the Creator. How foolish it is to imagine that we could possibly suffer by surrendering unconditionally to the absolute authority of God. The Lord Jesus gives us excellent advice when he says, “Seek first the kingdom of God,” and we are fools if we neglect this advice.

8. FAITH THAT WORKS

To believe is to act. Or to express it in the words of James:

“Faith without works is dead.”

Faith means, simply, belief—and if this belief is real and living it must find expression in action.

The works of faith are actions consistent with real belief. If we really believed that that parcel in the corner contained a powerful bomb that was about to explode, we would already be moving rapidly towards the door— unless, of course, we wanted to die. If our actions do not match our expressions of belief, then those expressions of belief are false.

Those who really believe in God’s coming kingdom will act like believers. As far as their material needs are concerned, they will be neither anxious nor avaricious. Believing that the God who offers them a place in His kingdom can also look after their meantime needs, they will seek that kingdom above all else. The Lord Jesus, when urging men to seek first the kingdom of God, added the assurance that his Father would not be forgetful of their food and clothing. This theme is carefully worked out for us in Luke 12, and it is well worth reading this chapter, and reading it again.

The “Faith” Chapter

Hebrews 11 is a chapter about faith. It presents us with an impressive array of real believers, and each one of them was a man of action. They all acted consistently with their belief.

Because Abraham believed God’s promises concerning the coming kingdom, he was willing to forsake Ur of the Chaldees, that sophisticated centre in the ancient world, and become a tent dweller. Because Moses believed in the future kingdom, he renounced the riches and pleasures that the Egyptian court offered him, and threw in his lot with a company of despised, oppressed slaves. The world was not worthy of such men, and they repudiated its fleeting treasures.

As yet these men of faith have not received the promised inheritance. They sleep the profound sleep of death, but in a little while they will be called forth from their graves to life and immortality. They will receive their portion in that glorious kingdom of God when “former things are passed away.”

“The Lord is Not Slack”

The Lord Jesus has not come yet. The kingdom is not yet established. The faithful have not yet received the promises. While some have mocked and others have drifted, God’s true servants have thanked Him for his mercy:

“The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness;

but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

It is a wonderful thought that the very delay is for our sakes. Every day is a day of grace and opportunity. But the day of the Lord will come—soon.

Making a Start

Time is short. What can we do?

First, we must tell ourselves that worldly pleasures and ambitions can be a snare. It is the coming kingdom that matters.

Next, we should resolve to discipline ourselves to read the Scriptures daily. They will tell us how to become true followers of the Lord Jesus—people who will look forward to his coming with joy and not with fear.

Our duty can be summed up in the Lord’s own words:

“He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved” (Mark 16:16).

PETER WATKINS

If you are still interested, we recommend you to write for the 80-page booklet entitled “Life and Death—Face the Facts,” by the same author, to:

CHRISTADELPHIAN A.L.S.
3 REGENT STREET BIRMINGHAM B1 3HG

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