

Chapter 3

Glorified for Community

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SABBATH

Hold on to the Future

In the previous two chapters, we saw that God created and redeemed human beings for community. The first couple were fashioned by God, placed in the Garden of Eden together, and directed to form their own society and govern the world on God's behalf. When sin marred God's perfect world and cast humanity into disarray, God sent His Son to deliver us to Himself and to one another. He redeemed a people for Himself. All throughout human history there has never been a doubt that God intended to honor His original purpose for us: that we live as people of God, in the place God prepared for us, and enjoy glorious communion with God.¹

It is to be expected that God will not abandon this purpose and that in the new creation the redeemed people will glory together in the everlasting union with their God. He was always consistent in accomplishing his original purpose for humanity, and it would be paradoxical to

Revelation 21:3;
Revelation 21:1-26;
John 14:1-3;
Revelation 7:9-15;
Matthew 6:10

¹Sandra L. Richter, *The Epic of Eden: A Christian Entry into the Old Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008).

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expect that God would want anything less for us in His eternal kingdom.

Biblical descriptions of human life in the glorious kingdom of God are not extensive. Instead, we hear reverberations and invitations. Every once in a while, a distant echo of the last trumpet resounds in our hearts. We read short vignettes and, as if through a veil, we begin to see a delicate light that suggests God's countenance. It is just enough to entice our souls. At the same time, the authors of the Bible struggle to see eternity accurately and express it accurately, intimating that what eternity holds is much too glorious for human senses and the human mind.

Nevertheless, we need to hold fast to these inklings, for our identity as individuals and community comes not only from the certainties of the past, but also from the beckoning of the future. We have to look not only to what we once were, but also to what we will one day become. Therefore, in this chapter we will look into the future and reflect on the life of the community in God's glorious kingdom.

What do you think of God's commitment never to abandon His original purpose for humanity? What do you learn about God from this commitment?

SUNDAY

What the Prophets Saw

Throughout the ages, God's people have dreamed of life with no death, sickness, violence, or vast disparities between rich and poor. And God's prophets saw visions of a world in which righteousness and peace were the rule rather than the exception. They

did not live to witness the fulfillment of their prophecies, but they, and we, will see these prophecies fulfilled in the earth made new.

Micah saw a time when weapons will be turned into farm implements: "They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore" (Micah 4:3)². Isaiah's vision included a time when human distinctions would be swallowed up in the magnificence of God's presence: "And foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord . . . I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer . . . for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations" (Isaiah 56:6-7)." Amos saw a world in which people would never be displaced: "I will bring my people Israel back from exile . . . They will plant vineyards and drink their wine; they will make gardens and eat their fruit" (Amos 9:14). Isaiah also saw a time when fear will be a thing of the past, and predators—both literal and figurative—would be no more: "The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox . . . They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain" (Isaiah 65:25). John saw a time when joy will take the place of sorrow: "[God] will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Revelation 21:4).

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²All biblical quotations in this chapter are taken from the *New International Version* of the Bible.

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glorified people of God, and the rest of the creation completely and blissfully reconciled and harmonized to such an extent that this new world could be fittingly called the *eternal community*.

In your opinion, how does the biblical prophetic vision of future compare to prevailing cultural visions of future?

MONDAY

Eternal Communion with God
(Revelation 21:3)

The history of humanity began in the Garden of Eden where the first couple enjoyed a perfect face-to-face communion with God. God was in the midst of His creation. But then, sin changed everything and the human beings were banished from the presence of God. Cherubim with a flaming sword guarded the gate to the Garden, symbolizing the tragedy of their loss. Intimate communion with God was no more.

However, Revelation 21:3, one of the most comforting passages of Scripture, announces that the face-to-face communion God had with humanity in the Garden of Eden will be restored. Between Eden lost and Eden restored, however, our communication with God has been partial and imperfect. And all throughout the Bible, God promises and intimates that He is not giving up on His desire to be with His people (the Sanctuary, the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire, the incarnation of the Son of God, the Pentecost). The Biblical prophets envisioned a time when God will dwell with His people forever (Ezekiel 37:27-28; Zechariah 8:8) and when the nations of the world will have the great honor of dwelling with God (Isaiah

56:7; Zechariah 2:10-11). At the end of history, the promises and desire of God will reach their final and complete fulfillment. As the Apostle Paul states: "For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then, I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

The eternal kingdom of God in the new heaven and new earth will witness the most glorious sight—the ultimate communion of God and His creation. The Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit will dwell in the restored, harmonious, and peaceful creation, with the people of God. There will be no other gods for the people of God; they will be free of any kind of idolatry that harmed them all throughout history. All false loyalties and false worship will end. The only true God will be with them and will be their God. There are no time limits or chronological constraints; the communion with God will be unending.

What thoughts and affections do you have when you ponder that your destiny is the face-to-face communion with God?

TUESDAY

Eternal Community of God's People
(Revelation 21:1-26)

Many Christians imagine God's future kingdom as something akin to a traditional and popular understanding of *heaven*. They approximate it to some combination of disembodied floating spirits and winged angels tiptoeing on woolly clouds, against the background of Bachesque organ music. But the prophetic vision of the new world is very different. It

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is more akin to a *new earth* (see Revelation 21:5), with many glorified trappings of terrestrial bodily life.

A part of the last and greatest description of God's future kingdom in Revelation 21-22, Revelation 21 presents a vision of the new creation that is fundamentally communal. In this chapter, the redeemed and glorified people of God are predominantly identified as a community and are functioning as a community.

The passage envisions an extraordinary wedding scene. The Bride in this scene is corporate; she is not to be envisioned as every redeemed believer separately. Instead, there is only one Bride and it is the holy city, the New Jerusalem. The redeemed and glorified people of God are a city, which means that they are understood as a society or community. The city is so complex, populous, and vast that it cannot be surveyed and appreciated from the ground level, so John is transported to a high mountain, and from there he observes the city coming down to the new earth. This city, the Bride of Christ, is descending from heaven, instead of ascending from earth, to meet her Groom. The Groom has chosen to dwell on the new earth, with his Bride, the people of God, so He meets His Bride on the new earth and dwells with her as her Husband and God.

Finally, the chapter speaks in a remarkable way of the participation of other nations in the New Jerusalem. Verse 3 uses the Greek words *laoi autou*, which should be translated as "His peoples" (note the plural noun). It means that the nations of the world will not appear before God as assemblies of independent individuals, but they will become God's

own peoples. Moreover, the city is so glorious that the kings and nations of the world join in and surrender their own glory to it (v. 24). Therefore, the city is the epitome of the diversity of humanity since it opens its doors to the nations of the world and welcomes them into the community of God's people.

How would you evaluate the culture of community at Sligo church? Do we have a strong community culture? Do we need to change or strengthen our culture of community as we await the dawning of the eternal kingdom of God and the eternal life as God's community?

WEDNESDAY

Mansions in Glory?

(John 14:1-3)

Many of us can recall the memorable translation of John 14:2 in the King James Version, which begins, "In my Father's house are many mansions . . ." Encouraged by this exact wording and traditional Christian songs about mansions in glory, generations of Christians have longed for the pleasant dwellings promised to the people of God in the future kingdom. The streets of gold, marble walls, and manicured lawns long ago became part of popular Adventist lore.

But the context of Jesus' promise and the echoes in the text itself seem to point to a different reality.³ The word translated in the King James Bible as "mansions" is the Greek word *monē*, which means "dwelling place," "abode," or even "room." When Jesus used it, the reference probably did not conjure thoughts of mansions, for nobody at that time lived in

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³This section reflects ideas from Richter, 39.

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a mansion. Ordinary people lived in structures known as four-room pillared houses. Each of these structures housed a single nuclear family and was adjoined to other single-family units, occupied by relatives. It was possible that such a compound would number up to 30 individual members of an extended family. This extended family and the compound itself were called *bêṯ'āb* (pronounced *beth av*), which means “father’s house[hold].” The eldest male, the father of the household, had the greatest and ultimate responsibility for the safety, wellbeing, and successful development of every family member. But the family itself also provided vital support and protection.

Life outside of the father’s house was precarious. If an individual separated himself or herself from *bêṯ'āb*, from their own essential community, they would deprive themselves of critical resources for life, vital social network, and physical protection. Such a person would be extremely vulnerable, and, therefore, it was crucial for every individual in ancient Israel to be attached to a *bêṯ'āb* at all times. This connection to community was a lifeline for every individual.

When Jesus said his “father’s house” has “many dwelling places,” He did not promise His disciples a consumerist vision of everlasting life, or eternal five-star accommodations, per se. He promised them and us eternal life in a place that is the quintessence of peace, safety, and wellbeing. It is a place in the household of our loving and comforting Heavenly Father, in the middle of the family, whose members we will address as brothers and sisters. We will be in the community of God’s people, where we are embraced, welcomed, and never estranged. We will be

forever included and accepted. The vision that Jesus has for his glorified disciples is eternal life in the midst of a caring, loving, and affirming community.

Do you have experiences of being excluded, rejected, estranged, and discriminated against? What does the promise of eternal life in the household of God mean to you?

THURSDAY

Eternal Work of the Community

(Revelation 7:9-15)

The highest and ultimate work of the redeemed and glorified community in the world made new is the worship and praise of God. That act—of giving glory to one true God—represents the greatest purpose and imperative throughout the eternal ages for the community of God, and the ultimate purpose of every human being who constitutes the community of faith is precisely to glorify God and worship Him forever. In this purpose, the community joins the universe and the heavenly courts that worship God in holiness and purity (Revelation 5:13).

Scripture records that worship of God in community was an expectation for and practice of the people of God throughout history (see Psalms 67:5; 122:1, 4; 149:1; Acts 2:46). At the same time, the prophets of God held up a vision of corporate worship at the end of the age and also in the world made new (see Isaiah 2:2-3; Zechariah 14:16).

In Revelation 7:9-15 we see the vision of the Old Testament prophets and poets being fulfilled in God’s new world. The redeemed and glorified people of

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God, all those who believe in the holy life, sacrificial death, and triumphant resurrection of the Son of God as their only righteousness, stand before the Lamb and worship Him. The text is gloriously inclusive, for the people are gathered “from every nation, tribe, people and language.” All these diverse peoples, whose number no one knows, are united into one immense eternal community. They present themselves to God as a community, they belong to Jesus Christ together as a community, and they submit themselves to their Lamb-like Shepherd as a community.

The numberless multitude of God’s people stand before the Lamb and worship Him. They wear robes washed in the blood of the Lamb, greet Him with palm branches, and cry out praises to God and the Lamb for salvation. The multitude praises God eternally and ceaselessly. Their work of worship and glorifying God never ends—it continues day and night. And this solemn and joyful labor of love unites the glorified community of God. This is the vision of our life in eternity.

Can you imagine yourself in the numberless multitude that worships God and the Lamb, described in Revelation 7? What does the biblical vision of ceaseless corporate worship of God throughout eternity mean to you today? How does it inform, or even challenge, your attitude toward corporate worship in our church?

FRIDAY

The Future Begins (Matthew 6:10)

Jesus taught His disciples to pray for God’s will to be done “on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). This supplication is the great longing of His people. If we love God and honor His will, we have to pray for the day when the earth will resemble heaven more closely. But our prayers ring true when they are reflected in our lives. If we truly pray for God’s will on earth, we will also work for the earth to resemble the heaven more closely.

At some point, we will be tempted to believe that all we should long for is here on earth, in this life—that all the heaven we need lies in our children’s successes, our favorite sports team’s victories, or in our vacations, in good food, and in financial success. But the vision of God’s future kingdom, where we will live as a community and praise God forever as a community, compels us to live the way of the kingdom today.

If the eternal community awaits us in the kingdom of glory, and if this is the will of God for us at Sligo, we ought to be about our Father’s business. As we seek to uphold the will of God, we will lay down our obsessive pursuits of status, wealth, pleasure and recognition, and embrace with all of our being the mandate of building the community of God in our church. Our community will be wide and deep, based on mutual love, forgiveness, generosity, and grace. We will turn away from apathy, complacency, indifference, and selfishness and turn to each other. Our pursuit of such a community will demonstrate our allegiance to heaven. We cannot wait any longer. The future has to

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begin now.

Perhaps you have heard the expression: "They are so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly good." May it not be said about our Sligo community. May we rather hear the affirmation, "They are so heavenly minded that they are of great earthly good."

When you think about heaven, are you more prone to reflect on the absence of bad things, or the presence of good things? How do those around you know that "heaven is in your heart?"

How inclined are you to look to the kingdom of glory to understand who you are and what is the purpose of your life? Explain your response.

How can you personally contribute to building a true community of God in the Sligo Church? What sacrifices will you have to make? Pray for your personal commitment to the cause of community in our church.