

God's Great Tomorrow, part 3
Clairemont SDA Church
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Tina Maze, Olympic downhill skier representing Slovenia at the winter games at Sochi, Russia, prepared to begin her run down the slopes of the Rosa Khutor course. In first place at the moment was Switzerland's Dominique Gisin, with a time of 1:41:57. Tina gave it her best attempt, and when she reached the bottom of the hill, to her amazement and that of all who watched, she had matched the time of Gisin, to the 100th of a second! For the first time in the history of Alpine skiing at the winter Olympic Games, the gold medal would be shared and awarded to two athletes!

This was of particular interest because normally, only one gets the gold. Of the thousands who train, of the hundreds who make the preliminary trials, and of the dozens who actually compete, the coveted gold medal goes to one. All that sweat and sacrifice; all that energy and effort will ultimately reward only one person and one person only. That's the way the Olympics, and nearly all sporting events, are set up. There's only one winner.

The Apostle Paul makes a spiritual lesson of this. Did you know that he used the Olympic Games as a springboard for spiritual truth? Yes, the Games go back all the way to Bible times, beginning about the 7th century B.C. with races, boxing and wrestling matches, discus and javelin throwing, among the events. They were held every 4th year and the Greeks even divided their calendars into these 4 year cycles, calling them "Olympiads." Here's what the Apostle said in I Corinthians 9. There are several words in this passage that are drawn directly from the language of the Olympics.

He wrote, "Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it." Verse 24. There was only one "winner" in the Games, but thank God in the greatest "race" of all, the race for eternal life, all can have the gold medal! All can be winners. Jesus paid the price for the salvation of every single inhabitant of this earth; every single son and daughter of Adam when He died on the cross. Everyone has been "elected" to salvation. Not just one, but all can receive the crown of victory.

The word "race" in that verse is the Greek word "stadia," which meant two things. It represented a distance of 220 yards (called a "furlong" in many Bible translations) which was the distance around the track, and it also meant the building in which the track was located. Our word "stadium" derives from that usage.

He continues. "And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown." Verse 25. The word "compete" is the Greek word *agonizo* which comes into our language as the word "agonize." The athletes put forth the greatest effort; no energy was spared to stretch every nerve and muscle in order to grasp the prize. The word "temperate" means "self-control." Athletes spared no sacrifice in their training to condition their bodies to the best possible state of health and strength.

All this they did to receive a crown; a "perishable crown." Keep in mind that back then the winner received a chaplet of apple leaves, which obviously didn't last too long. Before many days had passed, the leaves faded and became brittle. The word "crown" is *stephanos*, the crown given to the "winner." The name "Steven" derives from this word, which is used 9 times in the New Testament to describe the crown that awaits the believer. There is another word for crown, "diadem," which is a king's crown, and it is applied exclusively to Jesus.

The crown awarded to the believer will be a crown of righteousness, a crown of life which will never fade, unlike the crown of leaves bestowed upon the conquering Olympian. The crown that we'll receive will gleam throughout eternity in the presence of our dear Savior Jesus Who made this possible by shedding His life blood on the cross of Calvary. Paul spoke to this when, nearing the end of his days, he wrote his young protégé Timothy. "I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing." II Timothy 4:7, 8.

Verse 26 reads, "Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air." The word "fight" is a word from which we get the word "pugnacious." Boxing was part of the games back then. Sometimes boxers would practice and train by punching the air in an imaginary fight. Paul is saying that in his competing for the prize of eternal life, he is not as one who "shadow boxes."

“But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.” Even though all can be winners; all can receive the “prize,” the “judge’s nod,” Paul realized that we must comply with God’s plan and cooperate with Him in bring salvation to us. And what a great salvation that is! How sad it would be for anyone to be disqualified and miss out!

We’re studying “God’s Great Tomorrow,” and noting the timeline that God has revealed to us. It’s simple, sensible and scriptural, putting together all the passages that deal with His plan for the future and laying them out in a sequence which we can understand and appreciate. What is His plan? Jesus returns and takes us to heaven, just as He promised. We spend a thousand years with Him up there (not on earth) while Satan and his angels are alone on this darkened planet. After the thousand years, the Lord, His city and His people descend from heaven and the wicked are raised for final judgment, after which they and Satan are destroyed by fire, which leaves them “neither root nor branch.” Malachi 4:1.

That fire purifies the earth and its atmosphere; anywhere the curse of sin has reached. Jesus then re-creates this planet to Edenic beauty and it becomes His capital. The serenity and peace He has always planned, interrupted by the virus of sin, is now forever restored and a life that stretches to eternity begins with joy unspeakable. What a wonderful plan! And God wants each one of us to be a part of it! He purchased your salvation and mine when Jesus died on the cross of Calvary, showing that He is serious about our salvation. Praise God!

The reason why it’s so important to have the timeline correct and the facts straight is that the devil wants to deceive people about Jesus’ coming and cause them to be unprepared. The only way we can avoid that is to know what God has told us through His Holy Word, the Bible, and to have the Spirit’s enlightenment so as to correctly understand it.

On my driver’s license there are four letters near the bottom. Those letters are “rstr” which stand for the word “restriction.” Immediately after those four letters is written “corr lens,” which means “corrected lenses.” What that is saying is that in order to drive legally, I must wear corrective lenses so as to be able to see properly. If I were pulled over by a peace officer and without wearing my glasses, he would be obliged to write me a citation.

Why do I share this with you? It's because as we journey down the road of life, we need to be wearing the corrective lenses that are provided through the Scriptures. That's why God gave the Bible to us; so that our "vision," our perspective on life, would be clear and accurate. What did Paul say? "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine (that means "teaching"), for reproof, for *correction* (that's what the lenses in my glasses do for my vision; they bring correction), for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." II Timothy 3:16, 17. I'm required, as noted on my driver's license, to have corrective lenses while I drive down the road to avoid accidents. In a more profound way, I need the "corrective lenses" of the Word as I travel down the road of life.

I need not only the Word of God, but the Word "rightly divided," that is, not distorted or twisted. That's what the devil wants to do, especially with regard to the teachings related to Jesus' return. That's why Jesus began His great discourse in Matthew 24, dealing with the signs of His coming, with the warning, "Do not be deceived."

He knew that the devil would try to distort the truths about His coming. That's what he did 2,000 years ago, and he's doing it again. We've studied how the devil took ideas from the Scriptures and twisted them so as to bring confusion and misconceptions. He led them to believe that those Scriptures that pertained to Christ's Second Coming would be fulfilled at His First Coming. Thus the Jews were looking for a conquering Messiah, One Who would boot the hated Romans out and re-establish the sovereignty of their nation.

Jesus did conquer, but not in the way they expected. He won the battle against sin and defeated the devil on the cross and by coming from the grave. He did come as the Redeemer, but in a spiritual, not a physical sense. Those Scriptures that were in the minds of the Jews will indeed be fulfilled but before Christ could come to bring salvation in the physical sense, He brought salvation in the spiritual realm. He had to come as the Lamb before He returns as the Lion.

Now Satan is doing the very same thing as he did before. This time He's leading people into believing that those Scriptures that pertain to Christ's Third Coming (after the 1,000 years) will be fulfilled when He comes the second time. Not so! In Daniel 2, the Stone which struck the statue and became a mountain which filled the whole earth will indeed be fulfilled, but not when Christ comes back the second time. It will be after the 1,000 years. In Zechariah 14, it depicts the Lord stepping on the Mount of Olives which then splits and creates a

vast plain. Yes, this will surely be fulfilled, but not when Jesus comes back the second time. It will be after the millennium.

It will be after the 1,000 years that the resurrection of the unjust occurs, as Jesus foretold in John 5:28; it will be after the 1,000 years that the "meek will inherit the earth," as Jesus promised in Matthew 5:5. But Satan has deceived many minds into thinking that these passages will be fulfilled when Christ comes in the clouds; that His Second Coming will be followed immediately by a 1,000 year reign of peace on earth during which many will be converted and receive salvation. That's a deadly deception! When He comes back, it's over. All decisions will have been finalized. There will be no second chance beyond that.

We know this because, as we studied, Jesus promised that when He returns He's going to take us heaven, to the place He's prepared. We're told explicitly that when He comes in the clouds, we meet Him in the air. He doesn't touch the ground at that time. So it's clear that those passages that talk about His feet touching Olivet which then splits; those verses that describe His kingdom becoming a mountain filling the whole earth must await fulfillment till a later time, which the Scriptures make plain as being after the 1,000 year period.

The thought I would like to share with today comes from Revelation 21:1, 2. "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband."

We'll talk later about what John meant when he said there was a "new heaven and a new earth. And there was no more sea." Today we wish to highlight his description of the New Jerusalem, the "holy city" which he describes as being "prepared as a bride adorned for her husband."

The word "prepared" takes us back to Jesus' promise in John 14 where He said, "I go to prepare a place for you." It's the very same word in the original that is used in both verses. The word "prepare" suggests time and thought. It speaks of loving attention. This is not something just "thrown together." Jesus loves us so much, that He has taken the time and effort to make a special place for His children, a place that will delight us with its exquisite magnificence.

There have been some beautiful buildings throughout history. Solomon's temple was gorgeous. The Taj Mahal is remarkable. But the beauty of the New Jerusalem will make these seem drab and ordinary. It will display the "Master's touch." No detail will be overlooked. And, unlike the buildings of which this world boasts, no termite will infest; no erosion will corrode; no rust will ever tarnish the splendor of that city.

With respect to Solomon's temple, which as far as earthly building go, would probably bear the closest resemblance to what God has prepared for us, it's interesting to note the number of times that the word "prepare" is used to describe David and his son Solomon's efforts to erect this monument. In the passages that describe the work that went into it, I counted 13 times that the word "prepare" is used; we'll look at just one passage. Let these two verses serve as a dim foretaste of what has been in God's mind and heart in preparing the city we'll live in someday.

David said, "Now for the house of my God I have prepared with *all my might*: gold for things to be made of gold, silver for things of silver, bronze for things of bronze, iron and things of iron, wood for things of wood, onyx stones, stones to be set, glistening stones of various colors, all kinds of precious stones, and marble slabs in abundance. Moreover, because I have set my *affection* on the house of my God, I have given to the house of my God, over and above all that I have prepared for the holy house, my own special treasure of gold and silver." I Chronicles 29:1, 2.

See in the attention and labor put forth by David a representation of what Jesus, the "Son of David" has done to "prepare" His city. David prepared with *all his might* and he *set his affection* on the materials going into house. In it he placed his *own special treasure*. All of these things tell us in an incomplete way, what Jesus has done for us in preparing the New Jerusalem. Jesus has prepared the city for His people "with His might." He has "set His affection" on every aspect of design. He has put "His own special treasure" into it. The value of the materials poured in by King David was immense, but it couldn't measure with the awesome beauty of what Jesus has made for us. That's how much He loves us!

Oh, what a day it will be when we are escorted by the cloud of angels to that city, and we assemble in front of it on the glistening sea of glass. As we line up and receive at Jesus' own hand a crown of gold, placed on our brows, fashioned by a special corps of angel craftsmen

what joy will thrill our hearts. A palm of victory and a golden harp will be placed in our hands and we will be gifted with the talent of playing that instrument with skill and beauty, and we will spontaneously give praise to the Lamb.

Through exquisite gates made of a single pearl each hung on brilliant diamond hinges the grand parade will march. Why gates of pearl? Where does a pearl come from? How is it formed? A pearl is the product of an oyster's attempt to deal with a foreign product, an irritant. It's "damage control." Perhaps a speck of dirt has entered its environment, and the oyster puts down layer upon layer of mother of pearl as a protection, as a shield against the foreign substance, resulting in something most beautiful. What began as a trial end up as a gem.

So it is that the foreign element of sin entered the environment of the universe. As a result, God's love was made more evident than ever before. It was laid down, layer upon layer, forming a "pearl" of "truth" that is beautiful beyond what words can describe. That love is embodied in the Person of Jesus Christ, the One God sent to this troubled planet to bring salvation and the light of the knowledge of His compassion. Jesus is the Pearl of great price. He is the "door," the "gate" through which all must enter to receive salvation. Through the trials and afflictions that He endured, through the sufferings that He sustained the character of God's love shines even bright than it would have otherwise shown. How appropriate that the gates, all 12 of them, be of a single pearl! "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men, by which we must be saved." Acts 4:12.

I know that this is the age of "inclusiveness," and you see the bumper stickers which advertise many different paths of philosophy and religion. But I would not be a faithful pastor if I didn't make it clear that there is salvation only in Christ. It's His blood that saves. Salvation is found in none other. Not in Buddhism or Hinduism; not in Zoroastrianism, not in the New Age teachings of self-help; not in the teachings of Islam which fail to recognize Jesus as the divine Messiah and teach the special truths of Scripture.

No, every single person who enters that city will know that it is only through Christ that entrance is gained. Jesus is the Pearl, the Door, the Gate, and everyone who walks into that city will go through a gate of pearl. It is also true that all who enter that city will themselves be "pearls," "gems" in God's eyes. They will have

personally learned the lesson of the pearl, that is through trials and afflictions that beauty of character is achieved.

The New Jerusalem is the city He's prepared. The Lord has experience in preparing. Four times in the book of Jonah this word appears. He's never unprepared! We're told how He "prepared" a great fish to swallow the reluctant prophet. Then He "prepared" a gourd to give him shade from the heat. Then He "prepared" a worm to attack the gourd and finally an east wind was "prepared" to discomfort the disobedient messenger. When the Scriptures tell us that God has "prepared" a place for His people, we can be sure that it has received His utmost attention and skill. In the book of Hebrews we're told that this work already has been finished. "He *has prepared* a city for them." Hebrews 11:16

The city is compared to a "bride adorned for her husband." With as much love as a bride prepares for her wedding day, Jesus has devoted His expertise into making this city something that will charm and bring enjoyment. Later in Revelation 21 we're told more about the city. It's says, "And the construction of its wall was of jasper; and the city was pure gold like clear glass. And the foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with all kinds of precious stones." Revelation 21:18, 19. Yes, this city will be beautiful! It has been prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

There are two "brides" that are referred to in Scripture, both pertaining to the fulfillment of God's great plan for the future. The "bride" is the city, adorned with gems and jewels. But in order for it to function as a city, it has to have people. Otherwise it would be an empty ghost town. Therefore the "bride" is also the church; the people who have been "prepared" to meet Him at His coming; the ones "adorned" with the character attributes of Jesus Himself. We'll speak more to that in our next study.

Today as we think about His great plan for this planet, and the home He's prepared, let your heart be open to receive His gift of salvation. There is nothing He wouldn't do and hasn't done in order to bring salvation to us. Undeserving as we are, He has chosen us; He has redeemed us; He has planned a future which will make all the trials and afflictions of this life disappear. Have faith in God, dear friend! Soon the night of sin will end. Jesus will come as He has promised and take us home, to the city which knows no night, which needs no light, for the Lamb is its eternal illumination.