

# In Search of the Loving God



Mark Mason

# **In Search of the Loving God**

## **Two Sample Chapters**

Resolving the past traumas of Christianity,  
and bringing to light its healing spirit

Mark Mason

*Dwapara Press Eugene, Oregon*

# **In Search of the Loving God**

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What has been passing for Christianity during these nineteen centuries is merely a beginning, full of weaknesses and mistakes, not a full-grown Christianity springing from the spirit of Jesus.

Albert Schweitzer

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# **Part 1**

Remembering—Ancient Inspiration and Medieval Abuse

# Chapter 5

## Jesus' Teachings — Living in the Kingdom of Heaven

Jesus came to Galilee at about the age of thirty to be baptized by John. In reverence, John said it should be Jesus rather than he who did the baptizing, but Jesus wanted John to baptize him, in order to “fulfill all righteousness.”<sup>[1]</sup> Although Jesus brought in a revolutionary new teaching, his aim was not to overthrow the existing religious Law, but to fulfill it, and many of his teachings refer to Old Testament passages, and are clearly developments of the old Law. Nevertheless, his teachings about how to live in the “kingdom of heaven” with God in the here-and-now were radically new, and have never been well understood, in his time or since.

The Jews were expecting a Messiah to establish a new “kingdom of God” in the form of a powerful Jewish nation which would rout the Romans and dominate the world. But although its name was the same, Jesus’ kingdom was diametrically opposed to the kingdom of worldly power and wealth many Jews were looking for. For Jesus there was the way of the world, Satan’s way, bound to lead to misery, or the way of God, leading to eternal happiness. We are free to choose either one, but we must choose between them. Jesus told us we can’t serve both God and Mammon, just as a servant can’t serve two masters (Matt 6:24). The Zealots almost certainly wanted to recruit Jesus to their cause. The devil, presumably in the form of one of these Zealots,<sup>[2]</sup> took Jesus “to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor.” He tried to entice Jesus to his cause, saying, “All this I will give you, if you will bow down and worship me.” In modern words, we can imagine a Zealot saying, “Join and devote yourself to our cause — serve our interests — and I will make you king of all you can see from this high mountain and more!” Jesus, however, was beyond being tempted by worldly power, and replied, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’” (Matt 4:10)

Having set himself apart from worldliness, Jesus began to preach about the “kingdom of heaven,” and drew together his disciples. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gathered these disciples around him, and taught them how to live in the kingdom of heaven, showing them how joyful it is compared with living in a worldly way (Matt 5–7). In the Beatitudes he said,

“Blessed are the poor in spirit,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
Blessed are those who mourn,  
for they will be comforted.”

The kingdom of heaven can only be lived in by those who are humble, and prepared to put aside their spirited, preconceived notions and surrender themselves, so they can learn as disciples. Those who place the greatest value on worldly riches, or even on knowledge of the world, cannot make much spiritual progress. But those who come to value spiritual things highly will consider themselves “poor in spirit,” and mourn not having found God. Since they mourn their spiritual poverty more than any material lack, God will comfort them by revealing Himself to them. One might wonder how such humble people, not valuing material things, would survive in this world. The common view is that the meek will be trodden under foot. Jesus, however, had a different view. He said,

“Blessed are the meek,  
for they will inherit the earth.”

This is a strange statement, at first sight. When we consider the ways of the rich and power seeking, though, it begins to make sense. Those who possessively hunger for money and power often don’t enjoy their lives much, as they are too busy making more money, and worrying about how to protect what they have. By contrast, the “meek” do not have these anxieties, and have the time, energy, and loving attitude necessary to really enjoy the world they live in. The world is their oyster. And being meek doesn’t necessarily imply being unassertive and put-upon. Meekness, as the word is used here, rather embodies the virtues of not being possessive or power seeking, of preferring to give rather than take, serve rather than dominate, cooperate rather than compete, and of letting things unfold in a natural way rather

than forcing issues. Jesus later elaborated on this meekness, advising people not to be anxious or worried about food, clothing or shelter, for:

“...your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom, and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”  
(Matt 6:32–33)

Jesus taught that there is a liberating freedom in living this way:

“If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”  
(John 8:31–32)

He also said,

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”  
(Matt 11:28–30)

The first of these three quotes introduces the concept of God’s righteousness. It is also there in one of the Beatitudes:

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”

What is this righteousness of God, which Jesus would have people hunger and thirst after? Quite simply, it is God himself, and his will for our lives. Our righteousness is our own view about what the right thing to do is; God’s righteousness is His view. Jesus advised people to seek God’s will rather than their own, and he lived to this himself, right to the bitter end, when he said, just before being crucified, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.” (Luke 22:42) Living by faith means actually being prepared to do what God asks, even if it seems ridiculous or impossible at first sight. People can become apprentices to God, the true master of living, and go on a great adventure with Him, if they are prepared to learn from Him. This can never happen, though, while the ego is still in control, and insists a person does things their own way. But by letting go of their own ideas and anxieties,

surrendering to God, and becoming receptive to new possibilities, people can place themselves under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Little children rarely spend much time worrying about the past, or being anxious about the future, and they have the humbleness and faith to accept the guidance of older people. They live in the present much more than adults. This is why Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matt 18:3) Fear comes from dwelling on the past, and being anxious about the future. It also comes from holding certain wrong attitudes with regard to other people, which are bound to make us worry about what has happened and might happen. Avoiding these negative, fearful and selfish states of mind, Jesus called being "pure of heart." One of the Beatitudes says: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."

Jesus goes on to explain that being pure of heart also means having pure, unselfish, motives, yet he points out how being this way is in a person's own enlightened self-interest in the long run. He says people should not judge others, or it will come back on themselves. Rather, they should readily forgive and forget the wrongs others have done them, in order that they can be forgiven for, and forget, their own past wrongs. It is not sufficient to just avoid harming others; people should also avoid even becoming angry, as this will separate them from God and land them in misery.<sup>[3]</sup> They should be loyal and faithful to their friends. They should not fight back when they know they can win, and not get upset when people wrong them. They should be kind and merciful, and do good deeds out of love, without seeking recognition for them. Above all, they should love all others, even their enemies, as they love themselves. This is because all people are one in God, and God is love. In loving others they love themselves, and in hating others they hate themselves.

When people surrender themselves, and their intractable problems, to God, let go of their anxiety, and just live in the present, hungering and thirsting for the presence of God, they soon become pure of heart, and God reveals Himself to them. But how does God reveal Himself? Jesus is very clear about it. He explains that the kingdom of God is not found outwardly, as any external manifestation, for:

“The kingdom of God does not come visibly, nor will people say ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is within you.”  
(Luke 17:21)

Through conscience and intuition God speaks to people, and through their inner thoughts they can talk to God. There are certain things people can do to foster this inner communion with God. The foremost is to spend time quietly alone, silently meditating and waiting on God, concentrating on the thought of Him, and letting worldly thoughts pass by. As Psalm 4 says, “Stand in awe, and sin not: commune with your own heart on your bed and be still.” In this quietness, intuitive perception of God grows. Psalm 46 says, “Be still and know that I am God.” Jesus spent much time like this, by himself, quietly absorbed in God. Luke says, “Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed,” (Luke 5:16) and “One of those days Jesus went out into the hills to pray, and spent the night praying to God.” (Luke 6:12)

This is the basis of Jesus’ teachings on the kingdom of heaven—an uncompromisingly spiritual teaching, yet a very practical one. He told many parables to illustrate it, often starting with the words: “The kingdom of heaven is like...” You can read the Gospels for yourself if you wish to explore these. For various reasons, which I will go into in later chapters, the established churches have always largely ignored Jesus’ teachings about how individual people can attain the kingdom of heaven in their lives, and have concentrated instead on some of his words about himself, and a lot of St Paul’s teachings about him. Many would agree with Wilhelm Nestle when he says, “Christianity is the religion founded by Paul; it replaced Christ’s gospel with a gospel about Christ.”<sup>[4]</sup> This was a problem Jesus had in his own lifetime. He said,

You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.

(John 5:39–40)

No doubt he foresaw it would be a problem in the future too. The teachings of the kingdom of heaven really are about how every person can individually come through the eternal Christ to an inner

communion with God, to be guided by Him and have life in abundance. However, since the church is more concerned about who Jesus was, than with heeding his teachings, let's look briefly at what Jesus is recorded as having said about himself.

As a man, Jesus was very modest. He said, "By myself I can do nothing." (John 5:30) And when addressed as "Good teacher," he answered, "Why do you call me good? No-one is good—except God alone." (Luke 18:19) But Jesus also embodied the eternal Christ, which Paul defined as "the power of God and the wisdom of God." (1 Cor 1:24) In reference to this eternal Christ, Jesus made very exalted claims, but we must remember they were not personal claims, nor anything he took personal pride in or credit for, but statements about the universal Christ through which God created the world, which is the "Word" itself, the very reflection of God in creation. This Christ he talked about always existed, and always will, as that part of the fabric of the universe which is the one and only direct link between people and God, referred to in the Bible as the "only begotten of God." Consequently whenever and wherever people seek God and find Him, whatever race or religion they come from, it is always this Christ which connects them with God. It was in this context that Jesus said,

"I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6)

The church has often used this claim to say only followers of Jesus can come to God, and all religions other than Christianity must be invalid. This is denying the universality of Christ, a universality that Paul was very aware of, stating that Christ was the spiritual strength of the children of Israel during the Exodus, over a thousand years before Jesus was even born:

Our forefathers were all under the cloud and...they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food, and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.

(1 Cor 10:1-4)

Jesus affirmed this universality by saying “I tell you the truth, before Abraham was born I am!” (John 8:58) And he stressed that it was not his historical flesh-and-blood body which mattered, but the spiritual essence of his teaching:

“The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.” (John 6:63)

Jesus referred to himself most often as “the son of man” to emphasize his humanness and concern for humanity. Where his humanness and divinity overlapped lay his power to redeem humankind. He said,

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.” (John 10:11)

Christians very often, and quite rightly, quote this as a reference to the importance of the crucifixion in saving people from their sins, but rarely if ever mention the passage which follows it:

“I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also. They too will hear my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.” (John 10:16)

Traditional Christianity, in its narrowness and exclusivity, does not like the scope this gives for other religions to share in the universality of Christ, so it ignores it.

Although the church gives more weight to who Jesus is than to his teaching, it is also fairly selective as to which of Jesus’ statements about himself and his mission it quotes, as much of what he says doesn’t fit comfortably with its doctrine. Another example of this is the church frequently referring to Jesus being the “son of God,” but largely ignoring his teaching that we are all heirs to God’s kingdom. When the Jews were about to stone Jesus for blasphemy for claiming to be God, Jesus answered: “Is it not written in your Law, ‘I have said you are gods’?” (John 10:34) Jesus went on to argue: how can you say I am blaspheming for saying I am God’s son, when you are divine too? He added, as one modern writer put it, that “the only difference between them was that he had been ‘sanctified’ by the Father, a fulfillment they had yet to achieve.”<sup>[5]</sup> Jesus further emphasized that we can all attain to his heights when he said,

“The disciple is not above his master: but everyone that is perfect shall be as his master.” (Luke 6:40 AV)

The church has traditionally put a huge gulf between Jesus’ perfection “up there” in heaven, and our baseness “down here” on Earth, with the gap being bridged after we die if we are good and do what the church says in the meanwhile. But this was by no means Jesus’ attitude. Nor was it Paul’s, which makes it doubly interesting that the church chose to override it. There are, in fact, understandable, though worldly, reasons why the church selectively ignored many of the teachings of Jesus, and these will become apparent in chapters to come.

Reform of existing religion was a vital part of Jesus’ ministry. The early Christian church appears to have been continuous with the Essene “church,” but encompassed many new teachings and reforms.<sup>[6]</sup> The three main areas of Essene belief and practice which Jesus reformed were: the existence of a privileged caste of priests who established themselves as intermediaries between man and God; a lack of moderation and compassion, including an insistence on the strict observance of the laws of Moses; and a belief in predestination, whereby it was claimed only a select few had been chosen from the very beginning to be saved, and the rest of the world was predestined to damnation. This last view was an excess peculiar to the Essenes, but the other areas of belief and practice needing reform existed right across Jewish religion.

The high-priestly Sadducees were corrupt, and Jesus was often in dispute with them, as when he threw the money changers out of the temple. (e.g. Mark 11:15–18) It is fundamental to the nature of Jesus’ teachings that separate priests, acting as intermediaries between man and God, are not necessary—that all believers are their own priests. He taught that “the kingdom of heaven is within you,” and that religion should be practiced in private:

“When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” (Matt 6:6)

He also taught that “Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.” (Matt 18:20) Jesus made it clear that all

people can commune with God the Father directly, and this certainly makes a separate priestly class superfluous. Unfortunately, it didn't take long for this reform of Jesus' to be reversed and for priests to return to the Christian church as intermediaries between people and God. During the Reformation the principle of the "priesthood of all believers" was re-established in some denominations, but to this day the Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans and Episcopalians still have ordained priests as their leaders, and only these priests can preside over the Holy Communion or Mass.<sup>[7]</sup> How can so much of the church have so blatantly disregarded one of Jesus' most important reforms for so long? It is a question to keep in mind while looking at the history of the church.

Jesus certainly spoke and acted against blind obedience to the Laws of Moses, or for that matter to any teaching, and instead taught and acted out of thoughtfulness and compassion. Among the many examples of this are his healing on the Sabbath, and his justification of it to his critics by saying, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath," (Mark 2:27) and "Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment." (John 7:24) In an appeal to the keeping of the spirit of the law, rather than its letter, Jesus elevated just two commandments above all the rest:

"'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."  
(Matt 22:37-40)

That Jesus thought the law should be looked at and taught in a fresh way, depending on the circumstances, is shown by his saying:

"Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old."  
(Matt 13:52)

Jesus' moderation and compassion fill the Gospels. The way he didn't judge the Samaritan woman at the well, even though he knew of her many sexual partners, but rather offered her "living water" by discussing great spiritual truths with her, is an inspiring example to

all. And many Samaritans came to believe in Jesus as a result of the gentleness, love and respect he showed her (John 4:4–42). Then there is the story of how he saved the woman caught in the “very act” of adultery from being stoned to death under the Law of Moses, by saying, “He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone at her.” (John 8:7 AV)

Yet how long did this compassion and moderation last in the Church? When you read about the Inquisition, it is hard to believe the medieval church had anything at all to do with Jesus. And what happened to the respect and equality Jesus showed to women? Even in our time, how does our compassion compare with that of Jesus? Yet his example did make early Christianity more moderate and compassionate than the Jews and Essenes were, and it has reached down through the ages and into the hearts of many, and made the world a better place than it might have been. And finally, in Western countries in the twentieth century, the laws of our lands have started to reflect Jesus’ non-judgmental, caring attitude to moral offenders. Jesus was clearly saying that adultery, and other moral sins, should not be punishable offenses, yet it is only recently that laws against “moral” crimes have been repealed. Sadly, it has been humanists outside the church who have, for the most part, pushed for this new compassionate state of the law, and church people have often opposed it. It is a matter for concern in modern Christianity that large parts of the church are still pushing for a return to criminal status of homosexuality, prostitution and abortion. Jesus’ example and teachings are finally being heeded in our society, but not as much by Christians as by non-Christians. What must well-informed, perceptive people think of this? Is it any wonder revival is not coming to the church in the West, and people are looking to New Age organizations and other religions for their spiritual well-being? If it is to regain Christ’s mantle, the church and the people in it need to let go of their pride, and realize that “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.” (Matt 7:21) It is not too late to change: it is time for people in the church who are still opposing Jesus’ reforms to stop doing so. Jesus is no longer ahead of his time

— his time has come, and the time has come for the church to fully accept his teachings.

Finally, in the matter of predestination, Jesus made it clear again and again that privilege plays no part in salvation, and that it will be those who produce the right fruit, and love and help their fellow human beings, who will be saved. In paving the way for Jesus, John the Baptist said,

“Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves ‘we have Abraham as our father...’”

(Matt 3:8–9)

Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–37), the parable of the Wedding Guests (Matt 22:2–14), and the story of the Sheep and the Goats (Matt 25:31–46) to bring home the point that anyone can qualify for salvation if they produce fruit in keeping with the kingdom of God. One of Jesus’ other sayings talks of the additional need to come to him for salvation, but says that *whoever* does this will possess eternal life:

“Whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

(John 4:14)

Yet, despite this, St Augustine, St Thomas Aquinas, and the reformation theologians Martin Luther and John Calvin, all believed in predestination, and many in the church still believe in it. We should be aware that predestination is a belief which goes back to the Essene church, before it became Christian, and that it is not compatible with Jesus’ teachings.<sup>[8]</sup>

It is sad to see how often Christians are prepared, “in the name of Jesus,” to ignore many of Jesus’ teachings and reverse his reforms. And in doing so they get a church which closely resembles the Essene church which existed before Jesus was even born. However, Jesus’ life was by no means in vain. He knew his teachings would be written down and carefully preserved, even if they would not be properly understood for a long time, because the Jews had a tradition of recording the words of their Prophets. In this way, Jesus’ teachings have survived to inspire people through the ages, and profoundly influence our laws and way of thinking, even if large parts of the

church have never yet really come to grips with them. But this situation in the church can't go on forever; hopefully the church is on the verge of deciding to remodel itself on Jesus' teachings, and of deciding to focus its attention on what he considered important. The church, like society, consists of the sum total of its members, and these changes can only take place in the church if large numbers of individual Christians decide to embrace them. If and when this happens there will be a major revival of Christianity in western countries, and throughout the world. If it doesn't happen, Christianity will continue to dwindle, and could even be largely replaced as the bearer of Jesus' message of salvation by one or more other religions or spiritual movements.

## **Part 2**

Healing — Original Christianity at Last

# Chapter 19

## The End of Worldliness, and the Return of Jesus

Many Christians have the attitude that the world is going to rack and ruin. It's no longer safe to walk the streets. Crime is ten times as bad as it was in the good old days. The world is destined to terrible destruction in the next few years. Even apparently good trends like communism's retreat from Europe are just the devil deceiving us into thinking things are going well so he can complete his final death blow to the world. Only God-fearing Christians will be plucked from the flames in the last days. Most of the world's people are about to die agonizing deaths, then go to hell for an eternity of torment. This will happen very soon now, when Jesus returns to "rapture" Christians who believe in the literal truth of the Bible, and cast the rest of the world into "tribulation." All this is predicted in the Bible books of Matthew and Revelation. And they're telling you all this so you can turn to Jesus and be saved.

The evangelical film industry strongly pushes this line, using fear to convert people. The executive producer of one of its films, *A Thief in the Night*, estimated that this film which cost only \$68,000 to make led to a harvest of over four million conversions, and made many millions of dollars in revenues. The film is a graphic portrayal of the world in tribulation after true Christians have been "raptured" (taken from the planet), and centers on the anguish of a woman called Patty who considers herself a Christian, but goes to a church whose minister is a theological liberal who refuses to interpret the Bible literally. Because of this she is left behind at the rapture while her husband, a "true" Christian, is taken by Jesus. The makers of this film have said that it works best when followed by an "altar call" or an invitation to conversion.<sup>[1]</sup>

The attitude exemplified by this movie, which has many variations, is a direct result of Christian exclusiveness combined with an "eschatology," or "end-time teaching," based on a particular, very literal, interpretation of chapter 24 of Matthew and the book of Revelation. In every century, from a few years after Jesus died to the

present, there have been Christians who have thought this way, and were convinced that Jesus was coming back in their lifetime, and the world was about to end. Some admitted they didn't know the day or the hour, just that it would be soon. Others confidently predicted the year of Jesus' return, and some even the exact day. But on thousands of occasions, over twenty centuries, these predictions have been wrong. Yet, despite this, many Christians still believe the end of the world is coming soon. A few years ago, a book was published with a title along the lines of, "88 Reasons Why Jesus is Coming Back in 1988." When Jesus failed to come back in that year, a rather cruel cartoon proposed a new edition of the book to be called, "89 Reasons Why Jesus is coming back in 1989," with the 89th reason being that he didn't come back in 1988.<sup>[2]</sup> This is a fairly accurate reflection of the state of end-time teaching.

The belief that the world is ending soon is particularly prevalent among Pentecostal and evangelical Christians. Yet not all evangelicals and Pentecostals subscribe to this end-time teaching, and some have even pointed out its dangers. Arden Burrell, a prominent pastor and administrator in the Pentecostal Assemblies of God church in Australia, has pointed out one of the main problems with such teachings. His warning to the church was, "Your eschatology is defeating you." He explained this by saying that the belief that Jesus is coming back within a few years was causing people to put both their temporal and spiritual lives on hold. They were not making proper plans and provision for their future, or their children's future, nor were they making an effort in their spiritual lives to do the will of God, and grow in God's strength. Instead they were using the supposed imminent return of Jesus as an excuse for carelessness and laziness. I remember the ambivalent feelings of one intelligent teenager in that church regarding the return of Jesus: of course she looked forward to Jesus coming, but she hoped he would come later rather than sooner, so she and the children she hoped to have could enjoy their lives first. I felt this was a very healthy attitude, nevertheless, it highlighted one of the chief problems with end-time teachings, which is that only one generation of human beings can both be present at its fulfillment, and not miss out on the chance of a reasonably full life on earth. And this, of course, explains why some

people in each generation of Christians think Jesus will return in their lifetime, and usually toward the middle or end of it. There is the rather selfish wish that they be privileged over all generations, quite in addition to being a part of the small elect which is saved, while the vast masses of humanity are sent to burn forever in hell.

This selfish and exclusive attitude doesn't impress discriminating people, and only helps bring the church into disrepute. The damage being caused to the church, combined with the repeated failures of end-time predictions to eventuate, must surely lead many Christians to look at the books of Matthew and Revelation again, in an objective way, to see whether there is not a more universal significance to these so called "end-time" teachings, which every generation of Christians could participate in. Martin Luther dismissed the book of Revelation as irrelevant to Christian life and theology, and urged that it be excluded from the canon of Scripture.<sup>[3]</sup> While I agree with Luther about the need for relevance, I disagree, of course, with his proposal to remove the book of Revelation from the Bible. We can't just exclude books from the Bible because we don't like them, or can't make sense of them. In any event, I believe Revelation can, and should, be interpreted in a way which is relevant to Christian life. Indeed, I believe it can be read as an allegory of the joys, struggles and triumphs of living the spiritual life. In this chapter I am going to look into and discuss this interpretation. I am not claiming it is the only true interpretation, the last word on the subject. Rather, I hope it will suggest some new directions which can be followed up by others. Discovering a universal symbolic significance in writings of such vision as these does not necessarily deny the eventual literal truth of what certain parts of them are saying, but if it allows each generation of Christians to see its relevance to themselves, even though they are not living in the literal end-times, then I believe it is worthwhile. I believe all the New Testament teachings were meant to be universally significant to all Christians, and, indeed, to all seekers after God, whatever their religion, even though certain parts of them need to be interpreted in the light of their historical context and purpose.

The book of Revelation was written in about 90-95 A.D., for the edification of Christians who had been waiting sixty years in eager anticipation of Jesus' return to earth, and whose faith, in many cases,

must have been beginning to wane. It was an encouragement for them to stand firm, and an inspiration for their faith—a book of eternal, timeless realities. Pat Alexander points out in *The Lion Handbook to the Bible* that the book of Revelation is apocalyptic literature, visionary and poetic, making frequent use of imagery and symbols, and that to take it literally is to go against its whole spirit.<sup>[4]</sup>

A knowledge of the numerology of the time is also important in understanding Revelation. A part of the reason for ascribing symbolic importance to certain numbers was that the ancient languages of the Bible had no separate numerals, and letters of the alphabet doubled as numerals. These letters themselves had meanings, so to ascribe meanings to the numbers represented by them was a natural progression. Revelation's author (traditionally considered to be John the Evangelist) makes much use of the number seven, which often stands for completeness and perfection. So the "seven spirits" (Rev 1:4) refers to the Holy Spirit, with seven meaning "holy," quite apart from its meaning as a number.<sup>[5]</sup> Later I will show how "4," "6," "12," "666" and "1000" also have meanings as adjectives, rather than, or in addition to, their meanings as numbers.

Before we can even start to interpret Revelation, though, we have to understand why many early Christians believed Jesus was coming back within their lifetime. The reason lies in what Jesus himself said, in Chapter 24 of Matthew's Gospel. On leaving the temple one day, Jesus was approached by his disciples, who called his attention to its buildings. This prompted Jesus to remark, in prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., that "not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down." (Matt 24:2) Later, on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately and asked him to elaborate on his prediction:

"Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age." (Matt 24:3)

In reply Jesus gave his disciples some detailed predictions of the future, and the difficulties they would face in it, before he came back to them. Some of his predictions of travail could apply to just about any time in the earth's history, so people from all centuries have thought it applied to their own times. These include:

“Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.  
There will be famines and earthquakes...” (Matt 24:7)

“Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death,  
and you will be hated by all nations because of me.” (Matt 24:9)

and,

“Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will  
grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.  
And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole  
world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will  
come.” (Matt 24:12–14)

It must, however, be remembered that Jesus was being asked to elaborate on his prediction of the destruction of the temple, and that he was addressing his disciples with predictions of what they, personally, would experience during their lifetimes, and warning them against being deceived by certain events. To make doubly sure he was not misunderstood, Jesus completed his prophecy with these words:

“I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away  
until all these things have happened.” (Matt 24:34)

Despite the clarity of this statement, some Bibles footnote the word “generation” with “Or race,” presumably to leave open the interpretation that all these things Jesus saw could be applied to much later times, even our own. The reason why Christians want to interpret the word “generation” as “race” is that one of the predictions Jesus made of this time, that would “certainly” happen before “this generation” passed away, was that he would return “with power and great glory.” (Matt 24:30) Since Jesus apparently did not come back in that generation, it is presumed that by “generation” Jesus must have meant “race.” It is, however, a big step, fraught with danger, to assume Jesus meant something different from what he actually said. Nor could this be a translation problem, as the Greek word used, *genea*, properly means generation, is derived from a word meaning “kin,” and is the root of the English words “generation” and “genealogy.” By implication it can also mean an “age,” a “nation” or a “time,” but a “race” is not mentioned by Greek dictionaries as an

implied meaning.<sup>[6]</sup> This is, presumably, why translators feel constrained to retain the translation of “generation,” even though they would like it to mean “race.” Another reason is that Jesus said the same thing in a slightly different way on another occasion:

“...the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done. I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”  
(Matt 16:27–28)

This confirms Jesus really was predicting he would come back while at least some of the current generation of people were still alive. And this is, of course, why the early Christians, to whom the book of Revelation was addressed, were so convinced Jesus would return in their lifetime. Do we have to admit, then, that this prediction of Jesus’ was wrong? I don’t think so. I believe Jesus really did come back in that generation, and has been coming back to every generation since then, but that most people did not, and do not, recognize his presence. Most people were expecting Jesus to return in a physical body, albeit a glorious one, which could be seen with their everyday eyes, but it was not to be like that. When Jesus explained that the kingdom of God is not a physical place somewhere out there, but is intuitively perceived and experienced “within” ourselves, he put it in these words:

“The kingdom of God does not come visibly, nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is within you.”  
(Luke 17: 20–21)

Speaking of his return, in Matthew 24, Jesus made a similar use of the words “Here” and “There,” suggesting a like meaning:

“So if anyone tells you, ‘There he is, out in the desert,’ do not go out; or, ‘Here he is, in the inner rooms,’ do not believe it. For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.”  
(Matt 24:26–27)

The image of the lightning flashing from the east to the west speaks of omnipresence, of being all places at once: it is symbolic of a

powerful spiritual presence. It is like Jesus' image of those born of the Spirit:

“The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” (John 3:8)

And, indeed, this is the key to what Jesus meant by his return. He meant he would be born again in the hearts and consciousness of those who have been born of the Spirit, and that his powerful and glorious presence would be with them. Seeing something “in the clouds of the sky” is an image of spiritual perception, and the “trumpet call” is an image of the interiorly heard sound of the “Amen” (or the “Om,” of Hinduism), the “sound of rushing waters” (Rev 1:15), the roar of the universe, heard by those who have been born again of the Spirit. This is why Jesus said,

“They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.” (Matt 24:30–31)

So when Jesus said, “some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom,” (Matt 16:28) he meant that in their current lifetime, some of those in his presence would be born again in Spirit, and would see him come “IN HIS KINGDOM.” And which kingdom is this? It is the kingdom of God, for, as is explained many times in the Bible, Jesus is heir to this kingdom, and we are co-heirs with him (e.g. Romans 8:17). And where is the kingdom of God? It is “WITHIN YOU” — and that is precisely where Jesus returns. All these references to the kingdom of God and Jesus' return are consistent with each other, and within themselves, when seen in this light. When people are born again of the Spirit, they become God's elect, those who have chosen Him rather than the worldly egotistical way of living, and so Jesus said that when he comes with his angels, they will gather his elect from “the four winds,” that is from all corners of the earth, and from “one end of the heavens to the other” — from all planets in the universe where there is sentient life. And Jesus and his angels will continue to

gather his elect in every generation, when people come to God, and are born again of the Spirit.

Jesus was asked two questions by his disciples: one was about the destruction of the temple, and the other was about the sign of his coming and the end of the age. So he talked about the destruction and anguish which was in store for Jerusalem, and the spreading of his gospel around the world (which was probably referring to just the known, or “civilized,” world, the Greek *oikoumene*, extending from the Mediterranean area through to India<sup>[7]</sup>). Both of these things did, in fact, happen within the lifetime of his disciples. And he also talked about how he would come again into the lives of many of them. What is more, his two answers are associated, for the destruction of Jerusalem was a fitting image for the destruction of worldliness which must occur in people’s lives before they can be born again of the Spirit. So the “end of the world” means two things in Matthew and Revelation: the destruction of Jerusalem and Israel, the end of their nation and world as they knew it, and the end of worldliness in those born again of the Spirit. Jesus predicted the anguish would be great leading up to both of these great endings. Certainly the sacking of Jerusalem was to be devastating, but also, as those who have been born again spiritually know, there is no greater anguish than the falling apart of our little worldly empires — our realization that we cannot cope on our own — which precedes giving our lives to God.

This is a profoundly different way of looking at “end-time” teachings, but it is one which makes sense of it all, explains why the world hasn’t physically come to an end, and involves every generation of people equally, as the “end-time” of the worldliness of those ready to surrender to God approaches, and they are born again of the Spirit and become a part of God’s elite. This is not to say the world will not end one day; it must end at some time, and if not before, it will happen in about seven billion years time when the sun heats up to the point where life on earth cannot be sustained. Seeing the basic meaning of these Scriptures, though, and understanding its symbolism, enables us to focus on the true end of this world for us, as we give our life to God: the end times of our lives here on earth, and the end of our association with the world’s ways.

The Book of Revelation can be much better understood if we approach it with this view of the “end times.” It was written to inspire the lagging faith of those who were patiently waiting for Jesus to return, by giving them a vision of just how Jesus comes back to those who truly give their lives to God, and showing them some of the wonderful things that are in store for them. John was a man who meditated deeply on God, and was given a vision to pass on to the early churches:

On the Lord’s day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said: “Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches...” (Rev 1:10–11)

The Lord’s day may have been Sunday, but it could have been any day devoted to waiting on God in silent prayer and meditation. As in Matthew’s Gospel, the “loud voice like a trumpet” is the intuitively heard voice of God, a part of the inner spiritual vision, not any externally heard sound. John hearing the voice “behind” him means he heard it behind his physical senses, in an intuitive way. Anyone who wants to know God, and is prepared to spend time meditating on Him, will, in time, be able to hear this voice of God. It may be as the ever-comforting “Om” or “Amen” sound, which John, in accord with many others, describes as being “like the sound of rushing waters” (Rev 1:15), or it may be through the voice of intuition or conscience, bringing specific guidance or information. John describes how he reacted to this voice:

I turned round to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands... (Rev 1:12)

In the Greek the word “round” isn’t there; the literal translation is, “I turned to see the voice which spoke with me.” As a key to interpreting Revelation, I am advocating the suggestion that John didn’t turn round, but turned within, and what he saw was his astral body, the body of light which survives physical death, centered around the seven cerebro-spinal centers (or chakras), glowing like “seven golden lampstands.” These are the brain center, called in the Vedas the “thousand petalled lotus of light,” and the six spinal centers. They correspond to the brain, the medulla oblongata, and the five main nerve centers, or plexuses, along the spinal cord, which

feed nerves to the various parts of the body: the cervical (neck), thoracic (heart), lumbar (solar plexus), sacral (hara), and coccygeal centers. The significance of these spinal centers to spiritual perception is that if we are to withdraw our consciousness and life energy from the outer world of the senses into the kingdom of heaven within, so we can really love the Lord our God with all our “mind” and all our “strength,” we need to reverse the flow of nervous energy, which normally flows out into the world, and redirect it so it circulates around the “temple of the Holy Spirit” within. In practice, this involves reversing the flow of perception at these main nerve centers. These nerve centers are the “gates” through which we move out into identification with the world, or withdraw into the kingdom of God within. There are Yoga techniques, designed to give control over these nerve centers, which greatly hasten the process of finding the “kingdom of God” within. Some of these Yoga techniques involve circulating “life energy” around the seven cerebro-spinal centers, often through *pranayama* methods, whereby the “life force” is controlled through breathing techniques. The techniques I am best acquainted with are the Kriya Yoga techniques, brought to the West by Paramahansa Yogananda, and taught by the organization he started, Self-Realization Fellowship.<sup>[8]</sup> People from all religions can apply to learn these techniques. The fact that John reveals his use of such techniques in the verses of Revelation we have just looked at establishes an excellent precedent for their use by Christians. That John really did practice and advocate a life-force control technique similar to some Yoga techniques, can be further confirmed by analyzing this explanation of his:

The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand  
and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are  
the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are  
the seven churches. (Rev 1:20)

Churches are always, in one way or another, meant to be links between this physical world and the spiritual world, routes of salvation, ways of escaping from the suffering of this world. John is here explaining that this is what the seven golden lampstands, the seven cerebro-spinal centers (or chakras) are: they are the way in and out from the physical realm to the heavenly realm—the route of our

salvation, our escape to heaven — so he calls them churches. The seven stars were earlier said to be held in the “right hand” of the astral body (verse 16), and this is reiterated in this verse. The right hand is an image of control and power. What this means is that we can have control and power over these stars, not outwardly, in a physical way, but inwardly through the grace of God, as the astral body is holding them in the power of the Spirit. In verse 16 the stars are left unexplained, but in verse 20 John says, “The seven stars are the seven angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.” In other words, the stars are the power and light (angels) of each of the seven lampstands or cerebro-spinal centers (churches).<sup>[9]</sup> John is saying we can manipulate and control the energy in these centers (their stars, or angels) so as to use them as “churches”—links to the kingdom of God within. Yoga techniques such as Kriya Yoga are designed to do exactly this. Such a Yoga, and the spiritual blessing by which it is effective, is the outworking of God’s grace, a priceless gift offered to all who really want to know God enough to go to the trouble of seeking it out.

With this knowledge it is easy to see who it is, “who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands” (Rev 2:1). It is the divine power of Christ we each have access to within us, there to tap into if we choose to identify with it rather than with the world.

In talking about the problems and strengths of the seven church congregations, John is talking about the various problems individuals typically face, the strengths they have been blessed with, and the warnings they need to heed if they are to “overcome,” and receive the rewards from God he so beautifully describes:

To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations...I will also give him the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. (Rev 2:26,28–29)

The morning star is an image of Christ’s presence and power—the way, as we have seen, Jesus comes back to those who have overcome the world, and been born of the Spirit. The image is explained in the last chapter of Revelation, where Jesus talks of his coming back:

“I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright morning star.” (Rev 22:16)

The Sanskrit word “Om” (pronounced “Aum”) refers to the Holy Spirit, and is named after his voice, “like the sound of rushing waters,” which can be heard within by those who are in tune with God. The word “Amen” has a similar sound (when pronounced “Ah-men,” as it should be), and that it is also a name for the Holy Spirit is shown by this verse:

These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation. (Rev 3:14)

In Chapter 4 John again refers to the cerebro-spinal centers, or chakras, as gates to the kingdom of heaven, and to the astral body of light, formed around these seven glowing centers (“seven lamps... blazing”), which together contain the sevenfold spirit of God. This truly describes how the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit:

After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven, And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.” At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it... From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. Before the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God. Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal. (Rev 4:1–2,5–6)

The “sea of glass, clear as crystal” is an image of the perfect intuitive perception that is possible when all thoughts are calmed, and the mind is withdrawn from the senses and reverently concentrated on God alone. Thoughts are ripples on the lake of the mind, which break up and distort the image of God which is shining there always. But through meditation the mind becomes calm, the waves of thought gradually subside, and before long the presence of God is felt, just as the image of the moon appears in a still lake.

In this sea of glass, John saw the truth about the two ways of living: the worldly way, which the masses in each generation choose, and the way of following God, which only a few people, the “elect”

in each generation, choose. The “seven seals” (Rev 6–8) maintain the secrecy about the power of the seven chakras, known only to the elect: each is a two-way gate, and the power residing in them is a two-edged sword. By withdrawing the life force up into the spine and brain through each of these nerve centers, the kingdom of God within can be realized, but by allowing the life force to go down the spine and out through these nerve centers into the physical world of sense attachment, worldliness, with all its troubles, results. These are the two choices. John symbolically pictures the results of each. First there are these preliminary verses:

After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds... Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels...: “Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God.” Then I heard the numbers of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel.

(Rev 7:1–4)

“Four” stands for the earth, and the four angels are the laws of nature which govern the way the material world works. Nature will have no power to harm the servants of God, as they are living under God’s law, and are not bound by natural law. The “144,000” represent all the people who have chosen God, and the twelve tribes of Israel represent all the nations of the world. “Twelve” symbolizes the full extent of something. That 12,000 of the elect come from each of the twelve tribes, shows that no nation or people or religion is favoured over any other. The elect is:

a great multitude that no-one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language...

(Rev 7:9)

They are people who have been in the “great tribulation” of worldliness, but have come out of it by following the way of purity and perfection Jesus taught. In the picturesque language of the vision, “they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb.” (Rev: 7:14) Their reward, in living in the kingdom of God, is that:

“they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night

in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” (Rev 7:15–17)

By contrast, those who turn their back on God, and reach out into worldliness through their senses, wreak a terrible havoc on the world. The image of the “angels” (life energy), of the golden lampstands (chakras) being sent downward to the earth, rather than upward to God, is vividly portrayed:

The first angel sounded his trumpet, and there came hail and fire mixed with blood, and it was hurled down upon the earth. A third of the earth was burned up, a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up. (Rev 8:7)

With all of the first six angels, havoc is brought to earth, and one third of everything is destroyed. The seventh angel, however, is the energy of the “thousand-petalled lotus” of the brain. It is the highest and most important nerve center, and even when its energy is directed toward the world, it calls human beings to see the holy in life, and begin to think of God. So it is that thinking, reflective people are most likely to realize the folly of living in a worldly way, become sick of its alternating joys and troubles, and look for permanent happiness. When the seventh angel sounded his trumpet, there were loud voices in heaven, which said:

“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord, and of his Christ and he will reign for ever and ever.” (Rev 11:15)

This is a change within an individual: a conversion. Once this genuinely happens, a person will never look back—Christ “will reign for ever and ever” with that person. This brings great rejoicing in heaven, where the twenty-four elders, who were seated on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshipped God, saying:

“We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign.” (Rev 11:16–17)

But God has only just “begun to reign” in such a person’s life, and a gigantic battle between good and evil must take place, as the person’s bad habits and selfish tendencies, built up over incarnations, are painfully weeded out. The new spiritual seeker, determined to find God, is given a lovely image in Revelation:

...a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. (Rev 12:1–2)

This shows how much God values every new person who comes to Him: he dresses them in the glory of the universe, and is there to help them do battle with their old worldly nature and defeat it. Before this battle with the devil, in the form of the “dragon,” the woman gives birth to “a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter,” and who is “snatched up to God and to his throne.” (Rev 12:5) The child is clearly Jesus, and the woman giving birth is the spiritual seeker being born again of the Spirit, and giving birth to Christ in his heart—a beautiful image of the way Jesus comes again.

Two further aspects of evil in the world are then discussed: the two beasts. The first represents the obviously blasphemous and egotistical works of some human beings, the second, a more subtle and insidious form of worldliness, which is sophisticated, deceptive, and pretends to be doing good. This is the infamous and widely discussed beast who:

...forced everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, so that no-one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of his name. This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man’s number. His number is 666.

(Rev 13:16–18)

People do either display the mark of the world or show their freedom in God. But this passage also has a deeper meaning. It refers to the world being organized in such a way that it makes it very difficult for people not to be worldly, where it is almost impossible to do business (buying or selling) without becoming tied up with its unscrupulousness. It is very easy for worldliness to rub off on those

who have recently decided to seek God, and for it to drag them back into its clutches. Wisdom and insight are needed to find the way out of this problem, for even Godly people need to buy and sell, and in other ways deal with the world. The answer lies in the fact that the mark of the beast is “man’s number.” The essence of worldliness lies in people being egotistical and wanting to do things in their own human way, rather than through seeking God’s way. With this insight, God’s people can deal with the world safely, and not become corrupted by it: what they have to do is remain centered in the thought of God, avoid putting themselves first, and always ask God what He wants them to do, rather than doing things their own way. “I did it my way” is the way of the world, which gratifies the ego, but leads to inevitable pain and sorrow. “I did it God’s way” is the way to eternal happiness.

In the symbolism of numbers, “6” was considered a human number, and no matter how many times it is repeated, it always falls short of “7,” God’s number.<sup>[10]</sup> The number 666 is also almost exactly two-thirds of 1,000, which is, in this symbolism, a perfect, complete number, as in the number of the elect, which is  $12 \times 12 \times 1000$ , and the millennium, which is “1,000” years of peace. Man’s number being two-thirds of perfection is significant. When the first six angels hurled their strength down to earth (Rev 8 and 9), which, as we saw, is an image of people’s sense identification with the world, “a third” of everything that was touched was destroyed, leaving just two-thirds intact. This is the way of the world: even at its best, for every two things that go right, there will be something that will go wrong, progress is always “two steps forward and one step backwards,” and for every two days of happiness there will be a day of sadness somewhere down the line. This duality of the world can’t be avoided; it is its very nature. Only in the kingdom of heaven can perfection be found. And this is why living in the kingdom of heaven is described as a “thousand” years. Once people have overcome their worldly habits and tendencies (won the battle with the dragon), avoided the deception of the beast (worldliness tempting them back), then, in the language of Revelation, their “Babylon” has fallen, there is great rejoicing, and they live in the millennium, the “thousand” or perfect years of living in the kingdom of heaven, during which the

worldliness and duality of the earth they live on does not affect them, and temptation does not assail them. They are in the world still, but not of the world. Though, literally, the word “thousand” is used as a number, its real meaning is only apparent when its numerology is understood.

After being strengthened by living with God during these perfect years or “millennium,” the elect are again tempted by Satan (Rev 20:7). The devil loves to test the saints, and even, as we know, took a delight in tempting Jesus in the wilderness. But with the strength of God they now have, the saints have no trouble in defeating the devil. And this really is the end of temptation, worldliness and deception for such saints: these evils are then defeated forever. In the language of Revelation,

the devil...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. (Rev 20:10)

There is one more aspect of this drama of salvation to be covered — what happens at the death of the physical body—and John goes on to shed light on this. As it is a time of transition, a judgment must be made about where each soul is to go next. What John saw was that “each person was judged according to what he had done.” (Rev 20:13) This is the end of physical death for the Godly who have overcome worldliness: death belongs to material existence, “the lake of fire,” so whatever impression of the realness of physical death these graduating souls have brought with them must be cast off, and returned to earth, along with all the worldly souls who still hanker after a material existence. As Revelation puts it:

...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.  
(Rev 20:14)

An earlier passage showed that this lake of fire, or burning sulfur, is the permanent home of temptation (the devil), worldliness (the beast) and deceptiveness and false teaching (the false prophet). Now it is also shown to be the place where death, Hades and worldly people

reside. This certainly sounds like earth, or some other material planet. And, indeed, the lake of fire is the material plane of existence.

Those whose names are written in “the book of life” do not return to a material existence. For them the “first earth” has “passed away,” and they graduate to a totally new existence:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.  
(Rev 21:1–2)

This heavenly city:

...shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal... The street of the city was of pure gold, like transparent glass... The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp... Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.  
(Rev 21:11,21,23,27)

The Hindus would call this an astral world, and it is the reward for those who have overcome worldliness. Compare its description with that of the astral world Hiranyaloka, described by Sri Yukteswar in the chapter “The Resurrection of Sri Yukteswar” in Paramahansa Yogananda’s *Autobiography of a Yogi* Here are some snippets of a description which runs for some pages:

“The astral world is infinitely beautiful, clean, pure, and orderly. There are no dead planets or barren lands. The terrestrial blemishes — weeds, bacteria, insects, snakes — are absent. Unlike the variable climates and seasons of the earth, the astral planets maintain the even temperature of an eternal spring, with occasional luminous white snow and rain of many-colored lights. Astral planets abound in opal lakes and bright seas and rainbow rivers...

“The earth is dark with warfare and murder in the sea, land, and air...but the astral realms know a happy harmony and equality.”<sup>[11]</sup>

John’s vision, and the book of Revelation, end here, with Jesus saying,

“Behold, I am coming soon! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book.”

If this coming again of Jesus is understood in the personal, spiritual context I have been proposing, rather than the traditional context of an end to world history, the book of Revelation becomes much more joyous, coherent and understandable, and a lot more relevant to Christians of all times. It describes the actual process of salvation which all Christians, indeed all seekers after God, must go through.

A great advantage of this interpretation is its power to reconcile evangelical Christianity with the more liberal social gospel. The “postmillennialism” of the nineteenth century led to the church being involved in social reform, in an attempt to help establish the paradise on earth of the millennium, and so hasten the return of Jesus. Much of the impetus for the social gospel came from this. Under “premillennialism,” which came into fashion among evangelicals after the turn of the twentieth century, Christ was seen as returning before the millennium, and establishing it himself. In this situation, striving to improve the world seemed pointless. Evangelicals abandoned the social gospel, leaving it to liberal Christians, who continued to espouse it. My analysis in this chapter confirms the premillennialist sequence of events:

- 1/ Jesus returning (being born in our hearts),
- 2/ the tribulation (as we struggle with bad habits, etc.), and
- 3/ the millennium (perfect years of peace, living in the kingdom of heaven within, while still on earth).

This analysis does not, however, suggest social reform is futile, for the world is not seen as being about to end. Indeed, the contrary can be shown, for if we wish to have Jesus return to us we need to heed what he said, that, “...he will reward each person according to what he has done.” (Matt 16:27; Rev 20: 13) This makes the social gospel very relevant and necessary.