

John 16 – No One Has Ascended

06/09/2024

Scripture 1: (Jn. 3:1-13 ESV)

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him."

Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"

Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"

Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

Scripture 2: (Dan. 7:13-14 ESV)

"I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

Sermon:

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a “*ruler of the Jews*”. He was an important and influential person. He was concerned with people's perception of him, thus when he went to inquire of Jesus: a mere Galilean carpenter who people were believing to be a “*teacher come from God*”; he went to see Him at night.

- Perhaps he was greatly concerned about his own reputation and did not want to be seen humbling himself before this new Rabbi “from the back woods”.
- Perhaps he went to test Jesus; to learn for certain whether or not He is the “Real Deal” as He seems or if He was just another populist pretender preparing to promote revolution.
- Or, perhaps he feared what public knowledge of his visit might do for Jesus. That people might consider it as public support or affirmation, thereby granting Jesus an “official” endorsement, a “seal of approval” from the religious establishment, that it would give Him social “legitimacy”; any of which would be exceptionally problematic **if** Jesus was not who (or what) He seemed to be.

Nicodemus' initial confession, "*Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.*", can **also** be understood as a subtle challenge to Jesus even while he affirms Him; effectively saying, “Show me a sign and prove that you actually are '*a teacher come from God*'.” Considering perspective and attitude, Jesus' declaration, "*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.*", carries a different kind of authority.

Jesus, speaking as a prophet of God, challenges and contradicts the worldview of Nicodemus and the Pharisees, as well as the great Jewish presupposition that the Kingdom of God was meant to be carnal, worldly: consisting of an earthly Israelite kingdom filled with Abraham's descendants. That assumption is why so many Jews, and why so many other people today, miss the truth about Jesus, because they truly believe that 'heaven can be made or found on earth', while the good things of life and of this world is God's true plan and hope for us.

By contradicting, and correcting Nicodemus' carnal perspective about God's Kingdom, Jesus reminds him (and us) that the Kingdom of God was, is, and always shall be a heavenly and spiritual Kingdom, even as it is expressed here on earth. Thus, He explains the requirement of our being “*born again*”: of being born spiritually alive; to both be able to see and enter into this spiritual Kingdom.

To reinforce His point that God is the only Person able to grant us and perform this spiritual birthing {monergism}: not through logic or by reason, or even by moral living; after Jesus insists that “[*We*] *must be born again.*” He goes on to say, “*The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.*” reminding us that just as we cannot capture or control the wind, claiming it for ourselves, so too we cannot capture, control, or claim God's Spirit unless it comes intentionally and directly from the LORD God, Himself.

Naturally Nicodemus was shocked and surprised by this. He was incredulous because what Jesus said went against everything he had ever been taught and believed. Certainly, God chose their “exalted father” Abram {the Hebrew meaning of his name}, renaming him Abraham, the “father of many” {the Hebrew interpretation of his new name (Gen 17:4)}, and gave many promises for him and his descendants, yet Jesus said that neither natural descent from Abraham, nor following his obedient example was enough to merit entrance into the Kingdom of God. So his response of "*How can these things be?*", is completely understandable and expected.

“What do you mean, I cannot work my way, or deserve, or inherit my way into heaven?”

“Jesus answered him, *“Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?”* But Jesus' reply is more indicative and rhetorical than questioning. It is better understood as {You are a teacher of Israel, and you do not understand these things?}. Jesus knew who Nicodemus was and He knew what this Pharisee misunderstood better than Nicodemus could, thus Jesus was willing and wanting to spend this time with him: to correct him, to teach him, and to help him better understand, for his own good and for the good of others.

Just as Nicodemus had earlier remarked, *“Rabbi, we know that...”*, referencing others of like mind to himself, Jesus also speaks in the first person plural as He continues, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?”*, {While we cannot say for absolutely certain that Jesus and Nicodemus were alone during this conversation, that is the most reasonable presumption. We must assume that this conversation is not a direct recollection by John, which implies that either Jesus told them about it later (not likely since it is not recorded thusly) or that Nicodemus shared it with John sometime later, probably after the resurrection (most likely, since John must have learned of it somehow because our doctrine of inspiration does not ever imply that the Holy Spirit “downloaded” info into the minds of the New Testament writers. The specific source is then not necessary to be explained in the Gospel narrative by John [if it was recorded by Luke, we would expect a side note from him naming the source], especially when there are only 3 plausible options: Jesus told him, Nicodemus told him, or John was present (or a false 4th, that this is a complete fabrication). Regardless, as the Holy Spirit is the ultimate source and preserver of Scripture, we remain confident that this is a faithful recounting to the conversation being mediated through John.} but Jesus was not using a “royal 'we” here. The context is clear that He is speaking about Himself and His followers: the believing disciples and other witnesses to His diverse signs. He and they were speaking about what they know, telling about:

- What they have seen and heard.
- What they have experienced and received.
- What they have felt.

They were testifying and giving evidence about Jesus, God, and His Kingdom. They were telling it to everyone who would listen. They were sharing the Good News that they had received as a starving man will tell other hungry people where they may find and receive bread. They were preaching hope as dying men to those who are also perishing, except however, their words and evidence were apparently being rejected, denied, or ignored by some; by Nicodemus or others like him.

Later on in John 9, we find a story about Jesus healing a man born blind, and in that story the disbelief of the Pharisees is on full display. They disbelieved the testimony of people who knew him, and were witnesses to his healing. It was not until they heard the testimony of the man's parents, who affirmed his congenital blindness, that some of them finally believed that a miracle had occurred (John 9:18); believing the fact that a miracle had happened without believing how or by whom; without believing the cause.

So it seems that, even then, people disbelieved the factual occurrence of Jesus' practical miracles. This leads us to wonder, when Nicodemus came to meet Jesus, did he come believing or disbelieving the signs that he had seen or heard about? Did he suspect Jesus of faking His miracles and all of His good works? Was that what prompted him to come? Was Jesus no better than someone like the false prophet and deceiver, Benny Hinn¹?

1 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benny_Hinn; <https://www.bennyhinn.org/>

Whether or not Nicodemus was believing when he came to Jesus, we are confident that faith was confirmed within him before he left that night.

When Jesus asked him, “*If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?*”, He was not being mean or harsh. He was helping Nicodemus to understand and reason out the faith that was beginning to grow within him.

Jesus forced him to think about it, asking {If you do not believe these truths that you can see/feel/hear/smell, then why or how can you believe it when I tell you truths that you cannot see/feel/hear/smell?}. Believing the latter without believing the former is irrational; it is illogical, especially when it comes from the same source. If the first is unconvincing, then the second has no credibility. The only thing which can convince us to believe the second, but not the first, is the blindness of sin; of willful blindness; of complicity with Satan's deception; by denying the reality in preference of fantasy.

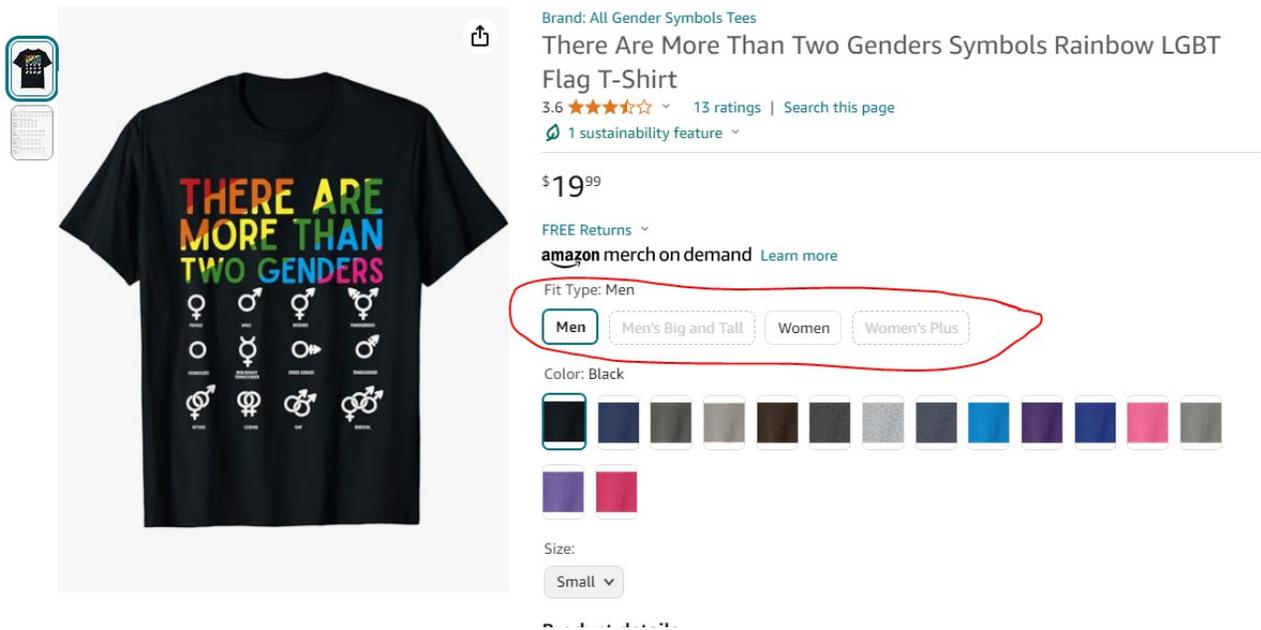
Is that not what many people in the world accuse Christians of doing: preferring fantasy to reality? I would instead accuse them of “projecting” their own fantasies and falsities onto us. They say that we worship a God whom we cannot see/feel/hear/smell: whom we cannot **know** is real and true; when they freely admit that the things which they worship are certainly not divine nor powerful. They laugh at us because we believe in:

- an omnipotent and sovereign God who created the Universe and everything in it;
- a unchanging God who created mankind in His Image, as two immutable genders, male and female;
- a gracious God who took on flesh, was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, died a excruciating death, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven to rescue His beloved, chosen children from our bondage to sin and Satan.

They say we cannot **know** that any of this is true, when the evidence for it surrounds us.

- The Universe is, therefore it had to be created by someone. *Ex nihilo, nihil fit*: Out of nothing, nothing is produced; or to say it another way, No **Thing** Comes From **Nothing**. It did not spontaneously create itself {spontaneous generation} because if it did, then it should have happened again and logically it should happen often. If the Universe was not created, then there is no purpose in it. If the Universe was eternal and not a creation, then it has no implicit value. Life, human life especially, would not matter.
- The propagation of the human race happens only through the union of male and female: of sperm and egg. No matter how much they try to mutilate the human form, only men can produce sperm and only women generate eggs. Their visible lies cannot transform the underlying truth. Even those who argue most emphatically against this will ultimately deny it because their T-shirts are only sold in Men's and Women's sizes² on Amazon.com.

2 https://www.amazon.com/There-Genders-Symbols-Rainbow-T-Shirt/dp/B083R4L7LX/ref=sr_1_5?crid=1AD85ZP5QP4WU&customId=B0B5B5MFZ3&customizationToken=MC_Assembly_1%23B0B5B5MFZ3&dib=eyJ2IjojMSJ9.uEH-HcQkQbykBNVwbDFTeC51MAa3uyakIPa4JmE1-ZSaBSRR2gOou8WirGu3gF6LawY6yKPCyV7OPII6reg4hxcub5WcMzCukbXcnZAwPgBGEuNjcBJ2RZzerUepaxqCa6AzXRJYegWEIAmbf_w_f3vdy19gi5zF_vrZBpZcte4Ly3PgSI17h4cUDMKZ-11st2FE6jQb110hqcO0sp9OydaeAIAbOr20Cjk6ZfU1JGFoUZoRiV2BerUO7feZh8qiaiAH4dV4pk9Zll6fgVsgUC1kz_WVlx-gCJQ2vFBTonO0.2zje4x89_-5tto0WIA8LixUWRltb8KefytT76jnS1BM&dib_tag=se&keywords=there+are+more+than+2+genders+t-shirt&qid=1717613237&srefix=there+are+more+tha%2Caps%2C105&sr=8-5



- Regarding the humanity of Jesus, His virgin birth, His miracles, His death, and His resurrection; although we do not presently possess any physical, archaeological evidence of Him, we have enough testimony to be confident both in the fact of His existence and why Christians believe He is Who He is. The Eleven Apostles and Paul, all willingly suffered torture and martyrdom without recanting. They died as witnesses to the truth that they knew, believed, and proclaimed. No person would suffer their deaths for something that they knew was a lie. Even the opposition records His existence. Jesus is mentioned in the Jewish Talmud, a 5th Century document, where He and His teachings are condemned. The beliefs of Christians in Jesus is mentioned in correspondence with the Roman Emperor Claudius (Claud. 25) {who expelled the Jews from Rome, including Priscilla and Aquila}, where Jesus is ignorantly called *Chrestus*, and named as the instigating cause of a series of riots in Rome.

So, because we can see and believe these earthly things, we also have the confidence to believe the heavenly things, the promises of God, that Scripture proclaims to us.

Meanwhile, our detractors “trust the science”, right?

- They may suggest that since they can point to a mountain and identify the different types of rock that comprise it: verifiable, visible facts that we can believe; then they may argue that they can describe the things which make up the rocks: elements and atoms, which are comprised of protons, neutrons, and electrons, which are comprised of even smaller components; all things which the average person among us will never see or be able to verify as the truth. Believing that takes faith, but while they continue to split and divide physical matter into ever smaller constituent parts, science cannot tell us what the most base unit of being is...but our reliable faith does. The eternal Word and power of God sustains all things.
- They argue that the universe was created by a “Big Bang”. That long ago all matter: all that is, was, or ever will be; was condensed into the single tiniest point as a singularity in non-space when it suddenly exploded. It began expanding further and further apart, randomly colliding and smashing together to form planets, and stars, and solar systems. Yet they cannot tell us where this singularity came from, nor can they tell us why it to exploded...but our reliable faith does. By His Word, God first created and then He said, “Let there be light!”

All those who remain outside of Christ find it easier to believe things like that, things that cannot be proven and require more faith than faith in Jesus, since their faith lacks a foundation upon truth. They believe in things that cannot be proven {remember also, that science does not deal in “proofs”, it deals in hypotheses and their disproving; science cannot prove anything, it only disproves that which is false (and it has not disproved Scripture or faith.)} and they disbelieve the evidence which is displayed plainly before their eyes.

Seeing is believing, yet it is not necessarily so with the things of God. Believing them takes the faith given by the Holy Spirit in regeneration, allowing us to believe and trust what we cannot see, except by “eyes of faith”. If you do not or cannot believe the physical and observably real things which our God has done: Creation and Providence, or the miracles, the many signs and wonders that Jesus performed; then you cannot and will not believe in or trust in the spiritual things that He has promised His children.

If you do not receive and believe, trust in, have *pisteuo* in the real Jesus: the Jesus of the Bible, the Son of God and Son of Man, the Jesus who was born of a virgin (miracle), lived a sinless life (moral exemplar), performed many public signs and wonders as a prophet of God (miracles), who raised the dead to life (miracle) and died a criminal's death (unjustly convicted and executed), who raised Himself from the dead (miracle) and ascended into heaven to reign at the right hand of God the Father (sovereignty over all things); **then you have not been** “born again”, you have not received forgiveness for your sins, you are not at peace with God, you do not possess eternal life, you are not indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and the LORD God is not your Father nor is Jesus your brother...but nonetheless, He remains your King and you will be judged by Him.

Jesus will tell Thomas, “*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*” (Jn. 20:29 ESV), and that is us. We have not seen or encountered Jesus in the flesh and yet we believe. We believe because we possess the evidence and the Apostles' testimony concerning what they knew, here in Scripture. It is trustworthy, reliable, and true. It contains truth and is reasonable. Furthermore, it is God's Holy Spirit who confirms its' truth within us so that we may believe and have faith.

While we cannot know what degree of faith Nicodemus had when he visited Jesus, we can be sure he was not all the way there, yet. Surely he did not yet believe in Jesus as deity, as the LORD God Almighty. But he surely believed that people were saying things about Jesus as a prophet (as a man of God), things which would have brought him searching. Although he seems to have been starting to believe the things they were saying about Jesus, he does not yet seem to believe Jesus' words: what He said; but that was about to change and we can be certain of it, because the very next thing that Jesus said was like a theological nuclear bomb.

After asking, {If you will not believe me concerning the things that you can see, then how will you believe me when I tell you about things that you cannot see; the things of heaven?} Jesus tells Nicodemus, “*No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.*”

Now maybe that statement does not carry the same weight for us or possess the same shock value because of our familiarity with the Gospels, but this would have struck Nicodemus and rocked him to the core. Jesus, first suggests that He does possess the authority to speak concerning “*heavenly things*” and be trusted. Then He suggests that only someone who came down from heaven can speak about these things reliably, reaffirming that “*No one has ascended into heaven...*” to become able to speak about such things “*...except he who has [first] descended from heaven...*”. Remember:

- Elijah ascended into heaven in a chariot of fire after his ministry as a prophet when he spoke the Word of the LORD, but he did not first descend (2 Kings 2).

- Enoch was “translated” or “taken away” into heaven by the LORD because he “walked with God”, but he did not first descend (Genesis 5:24).
- Moses ascended Mount Sinai to meet with the LORD, but he did not cross a planar threshold and enter into heaven to bring down God's Law and covenant (Exodus 24; Deut 30:11-20).
- The only person in Old Testament Scripture who may be described as descending from heaven is the “*Son of Man*” from one of Daniel's visions (Daniel 7:13-14).

Jesus implies that because He can say these things, that because He knows these things then therefore, He must be the “Son of Man”.

We know, on this side of the cross and by having the New Testament Scriptures, that “Son of Man” was one of Jesus' favorite expressions to use whenever He taught. We understand from the other Gospel writers, that whenever He used it, He meant it in regards to Himself, even as His recorded words did not directly claim the title, thus avoiding causing extra offense. It is also important to note that this is only the second instance of the term being used in this Gospel, where the first was when He met Nathanael (1:51).

What is so special about this “Son of Man” title? Why would Jesus' claim of it be shocking, offensive, or dangerous especially to the mind of a Pharisee and “*ruler of the Jews*”, like Nicodemus?

To understand this, we need to know where the importance of the term and title comes from. First, through most of the Old Testament, “son of man” is an expression used in reference to a generic, hypothetical person, as a general human person (Num 23:19; John 16:21, 25:6, 35:8; Isaiah 51:12; Jer 50:40). Secondly, throughout the writing of Ezekiel, it is used by the angelic beings to identify him whenever they spoke to him during his visions, effectively suggesting that the prophet was just a generic representative standing in for humanity or suggesting that perhaps, to the angels, we all look alike and are all equally inconsequential; they call Ezekiel “son of man”. Yet there is a third use and this instance gives the title the substantive weight that Jesus drew on. It is rooted in Daniel 7:13-14, during one of Daniel's apocalyptic visions. {Please turn with me in your Bibles.}

*“I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one **like a son of man**, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And **to him** was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve **him**; **his** dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and **his** kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.”*

Daniel saw in his vision, “*one like a son of man*”; he saw a divine person, not an angel or a man, but someone who appeared like a man. Then this divine “Son of Man” went to the “*Ancient of Days*”: the LORD, YHVH, God the Father; where He was given glory and everlasting dominion over the whole Creation. He was made sovereign over all things and given the authority of the “*Ancient of Days*”. He was given a kingdom “*...that shall not be destroyed.*”, which echos God's promise to King David, “*When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.*” (2 Sam. 7:12-13 ESV).

Echoing God's declaration through the prophet Isaiah, “*To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance.*” (Isa. 45:23 ESV). Daniel describes a event which Paul, another good Pharisee, will interpret as being fulfilled by Jesus, “*Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*” (Phil. 2:9-11 ESV).

This one who was like a son of man must also be the Son of David: heir to the kingdom of Israel and also to YHWH's divine throne itself!

So, while speaking to Nicodemus, a Pharisee and “*ruler of the Jews*”, Jesus, by calling Himself the “Son of Man” declared Himself to be:

- the Christ, the Messiah;
- the rightful heir to David's throne; and,
- the sovereign over all creation, as the LORD Himself.

Here is the crux of the matter, what Jesus just said to Nicodemus, if untrue, was express and total blasphemy. Minimally, by assigning Himself this title, Jesus just claimed to be equal to God, if not the LORD, Himself.

- Nicodemus was now faced with a binary decision: believe or disbelieve.
- Nicodemus faced CS Lewis's dilemma concerning Jesus' identity, forced to decide whether He is: a liar, a lunatic, or the LORD.
- Nicodemus had only two possible responses after this. He could believe, trust Jesus, and continue to listen or he could decry Jesus as a blasphemer, as an apostate, close his ears and immediately flee and then work to see Jesus brought to justice for offending God's honor {because his testimony alone was not enough to convict Him}.

But what did he do? He stayed and continued to listen to Jesus; not to trap Him, but to learn from Him, to receive Jesus' testimony, to trust and believe Him. Nicodemus, a guy who should know best, responded to Jesus' claim positively, with faith and trust, even as he still lacked understanding.

This shows us that it is OK for someone to believe, but yet still not understand what they believe. We all believe that our cell phones work, but none of us really understand how they work. Our faith in Christ is like that. We do not have to understand all of the how's, why's, and what's of what we believe. but we should try. Nicodemus tried, he kept on listening and studying, trying to understand what he was believing about Jesus.

So, if it was OK for Nicodemus to believe Jesus, then it is OK for us to as well. He did not have to set aside reason or logic nor did he have a “blind faith”. He became convinced in both his heart and his mind that Jesus is the “Son of Man”.

Jesus came down to earth from the heavens above to tell us about the things of God; to awaken us and our hearts to the spiritual reality of our sin alongside our need of forgiveness as well as God's great gracious love for His chosen people. He came down from heaven to tell us about heavenly things and to help us believe them, He showed us earthly things. Then, after showing Himself alive to the disciples after He had been dead and buried, He ascended back into heaven where He rules over an “*everlasting dominion*” until such time as He returns to set all things under His feet, “*For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.*” (1 Cor. 15:25-26 ESV). Then, those of us who believe and trust in Him, who have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit, “*born again*”, will be raised up and resurrected into eternal life with Him in His glorious Kingdom. Forever and ever. **AMEN**