

*You can see all the stars as you walk down Hollywood Boulevard
Some that you recognize, some that you've hardly even heard of*

This line is from the song, "Celluloid Heroes," written by Ray Davies, the lead singer of the classic British rock band, *The Kinks*. The majority of the song deals with the trials of various people who have stars on Hollywood Boulevard. As Ray describes them,

*People who worked and suffered and struggled for fame
Some who succeeded, some who suffered in vain*

But at the end, the theme of the song shifts. Ray Davies gets very introspective. He says,

*I wish my life was nonstop Hollywood movie show
A fantasy world of celluloid villains and heroes
Because celluloid heroes never feel any pain
And celluloid heroes never really die*

And that's a powerful fantasy. Never feel any pain. Never really die. That's escapism at it's best.

I don't know about you, but for me, such an idea is incredibly seductive. Yes, I live in the wealthiest, most powerful country in the history of the world. Yes, I live in a comfortable, suburban, middle class setting. But I know things are not always easy. In my life. In your lives. Disease, fear, debt, unemployment, pain, death. Those are part of our reality.

At times, it seems like a wonderful fantasy to be able to escape that reality. Beam me up, Scotty. Take me away.

*I wish my life was nonstop Hollywood movie show
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180 years ago there was a group who had such longings of escape. They read the Bible selectively, looking for a loophole, an escape clause. They found what they thought they were looking for in couple of verses of 1 Thessalonians.

They decided, that, contrary to what every other Christian believed, there was not only going to be a second coming. There was also going to be a third coming. 180 years ago, this small minority group of Christians came up with the idea that before the difficulties associated with the end of the world, Jesus would somehow come and secretly sneak his people out. He would literally beam his followers up and leave the rest of humanity behind to suffer. They labeled this idea "the Rapture." Later, and more technically it was labeled a "pre-tribulation pre-millenarian rapture."

It was a rather strange, 2 tier system. Jesus would come back two more times. There'd be a secret second coming and years later a more public third coming. And there would

be two resurrections, an initial one for believers, and a second one for everyone else. Strangely, this idea has gained a lot of traction in some Protestant circles in the past few decades.

The rapture has no real basis in the plain text of scripture. And yet it's become quite popular. You've probably seen the *Left Behind* books by Jerry Jenkins and Tim LaHaye. They've sold millions of copies--capitalism is a great thing--more power to them.

But what does worry me is the initial premise of the whole *Left Behind* series, that the books take place in a time of Tribulation after the secret rapture of Christians. Early on there's a scene where a stewardess is telling an airline pilot about a number of passengers who have vanished:

"I'm not crazy! See for yourself! All over the plane, people have disappeared."

"It's a joke. They're hiding, trying to—"

"Ray! Their shoes, their socks, their clothes, everything was left behind. These people are gone!"¹

Now as escapist fiction, that's okay. But as Biblically based doctrine, it's extremely shaky. It's putting way to much weight upon a questionable interpretation of a few verses.

And it's seductive. If you're a good Christian, God is going to rescue you from suffering. If you're a good Christian, you'll never feel any pain. If you're a good Christian, you'll never really die.

That's so attractive.

However, it flies in the face of Church history. There have been millions of people who have suffered death for the sake of the Gospel. I guarantee I could make you sick to your stomachs just describing some of the ways they were killed. These martyrs weren't rescued miraculously. They embraced their cross of suffering. In fact, scripture is full of instances where suffering is guaranteed for Christians. Jesus himself tells us to expect pain, persecution, suffering and death. He does not promise miraculous escape.

However, there is something that he does promise us. And for that, we turn to our Epistle lesson from Revelation. Last week, in ch7, we heard of the multitude of the faithful departed gathered around God's throne. They had suffered persecution and death on behalf of the Lamb. "Therefore," John said, "the one seated on the throne will shelter them." Good news for the faithful departed. They were not rescued from death. They suffered persecution and died for the sake of the Gospel. And yet, death isn't the end. God gathers them around his throne.

But there's more. And for that we turn to our lesson for today, from Revelation ch21. John relates this marvelous vision. v1 "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first

¹ *Left Behind*, p. 16

heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband."

This is not about God helping us escape from the earth. This is about God transforming the earth--making it new. And it's about God making his permanent dwelling place there, on the new, transformed earth. v3 "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them.'"

And the effects of God's intimate presence are set forth: 4 "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more."

Never feel any pain? Sorry, that's not what's promised. Never really die? That's not the way it works. All of us will experience pain. That's part of the reality of living in the world. And unless the second coming happens in our lifetimes, all of us will experience death. God will not rescue us. But God can transform us. God will make all things new. Pain and death will be eliminated.

And this is not "pie in the sky by and by." This is not escapism. This is information we can use in living our lives right now. We don't have to fear death. Death will one day be destroyed. We don't have to deny the reality of death. We don't have to look for a loophole. Instead, we can embrace our mortality, we can live our lives boldly, trusting in the power of the God of Resurrection.

We don't have to fear the pain of loss and separation. One day such grief will be ended. Separation is a temporary state, not a permanent one. We don't have to be afraid of those who can harm the body but cannot touch the soul. Pain and suffering are transitory. Resurrected life in God's presence is forever. We don't have to wait for rescue.

Instead, we can live, now, today, in the power of the New Jerusalem, in the power of Jesus' Resurrection. We can trust the God who raised Jesus from the dead. We can trust the God who makes all things new.

Today we're offering thanks for our graduates. They're soon going to be launched out into the "real world." And graduates, if you think things are always going to be easy, think again. The real world is full of challenge and difficulty, and yes, often suffering and pain as well.

Being a Christian will not exempt you from the difficulties of life. In fact, following Jesus Christ often makes life more difficult. But being a Christian can allow you to live boldly in the midst of what's frightening, to move forward in hope when things look bleak.

God never promises to rescue you. But God does promise to be present, to be with you, to guide you, to give you purpose and direction in your life.

You will experience pain and suffering. You will eventually die.

But will you let these realities determine the course of your life?

Or will you trust in God? Will you live in hope? Will you see suffering and pain and death as only temporary setbacks?

Will you pray that his kingdom comes, and that his will is done, on earth, as it is in heaven?

That's your choice Will you live in fear and long for rescue?

Or will you live in the freedom of the promises that God's kingdom brings?

"Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more." God will always be with us. And God will make all things new.