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GOD'S GARDEN

***Bible studies on the Garden of Eden and
the Paradise of God in heaven***

God's Garden by Hugo Bouter
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'I know a man in Christ (...) how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter'.

2 Corinthians 12:2-4

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PREFACE

When Adam and Eve had sinned, they were expelled from the earthly paradise where they had been put and the entrance to the garden was for ever blocked by an angel with a flaming sword. For man, having fallen in sin, any return to the garden had become impossible. Yet God has given something better instead, for Christ's obedience has farther reaching consequences than Adam's disobedience. Christ's finished work on the cross of Calvary has opened up the entrance to a different, a new and heavenly garden: God's own Paradise in heaven!

The New Testament speaks about this place of perfect bliss only three times. What is told us about it, however, is quite important indeed as it sheds much light on the unsearchable riches of the Person and the work of Christ:

- (1) First of all, believers who have fallen asleep through Jesus are in the immediate presence of their Lord and Saviour. They are with Christ in Paradise, as He promised to the criminal who believed in Him: 'Today you will be with Me in Paradise' (Luke 23:43). Therefore the apostle Paul says that he desired to 'depart and be with Christ, which is far better' (Fil. 1:23). Christ is the great Centre here of all those who are His. He is the One who fills all in all.
- (2) Secondly, those who sleep in Jesus are also in the *third* heaven, i.e., the heaven of heavens, the dwelling place of God Himself (2 Cor. 12:2-5). They are in God's immediate presence and hear inexpressible heavenly words, which no man on earth can ever utter. Paul speaks of himself somewhat cryptically as 'a man in Christ', and with good reason. *Christ* is there, but in

principle it is also the place of all those who are united *with Him* as the last Adam.

- (3) Thirdly, according to Revelation 2:7 this heavenly Paradise is also 'the Paradise of God'. Unlike the earthly paradise, it cannot be spoiled by man as it bears all the marks of divine perfection and of the absence of sin and death. Therefore, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, to which we owe our accusing conscience, is lacking. We only read about the tree of life, which doubtlessly is a picture of Christ as the Origin and the Sustainer of the new life, the new man, the new creation.

That is why we have liberty, in the footsteps of the great apostle of the nations, to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ and make known the manifold wisdom of God, the Creator of all things (Eph. 3:8-10). He opened up Paradise again for us and granted us access to the true tree of life, and to the river of life.

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1. THE MEANING OF THE TREE AND THE WATER OF LIFE IN THE BIBLE

'The LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden (...) And out of the ground the LORD God made every tree grow that is pleasant in the sight and good for food. The tree of life was also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Now a river went out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it parted and became four riverheads.'

Genesis 2:8-10

The Garden of Eden

According to Genesis 2, the garden where God put the first man whom He had formed, was located somewhere in Mesopotamia, between the rivers Euphrates and Tigris. Usually, we refer to the garden as 'paradise', a word of Persian origin which means 'pleasure garden', 'garden of delight'. In the Old Testament it occurs just a few times, like in Song of Solomon 4:12. This scripture, as we shall see in chapter 2, is also important for our subject. In this little book we want to focus mainly on the spiritual and symbolical meaning of the river and the tree of life without, however, detracting from its literal and historical value. Without any doubt, the Garden of Eden, the two trees and the speaking serpent were perceptible phenomena. But it is remarkable indeed that the Bible not only begins with paradise, it also ends with it. In the last book of the Bible we find the counterpart of the Garden of Eden: a heavenly paradise, the paradise of God (Rev. 2:7).

The book of Revelation shows both parallels and contrasts with the book of Genesis. In the book of Revelation paradise is stressed to be not *man's* but *God's* paradise. It is His own garden of delight, and it is by grace overabounding that we, as God's children, can share in His own delight. Into this paradise of God sin will be unable to enter, and there will be no place for the devil and for death; they will be defeated enemies (1 Cor. 15:26; Rev. 21:4). Even the tree of the knowledge of good and evil will not be found here anymore, which is very remarkable indeed (cf. Gen. 2:9; 3:3 with Rev. 2:7; 22:2, 14). From this one cannot but conclude that there is no possibility of sinning anymore; our conscience will no longer be able to accuse and charge us. As far as our position as Christians is concerned, this is true even now. By the finished work of Christ we have been cleansed from the awareness of evil, sprinkled from an evil conscience (Heb. 10:22). That is our position in Christ before God, for in the glorified Lord we are made perfect (cf. Eph. 1:4-6). However, we know full well that in practice, things may often look different, that a believer can sin after his conversion and be accused by his conscience. Then it is necessary to confess the sin and the guilt in order to enjoy practical fellowship with God again. In God's paradise this will be a thing of the past.

Christ, the true tree of life

The description of the Garden of Eden begins with the trees which the LORD God made grow out of the ground (Gen. 2:9). The tree of life in the midst of the garden is mentioned separately, like the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They are followed by a number of statements about the paradise river (Gen. 2:10). A river sprung up in paradise itself to water it and render it fertile, then split into four main rivers that brought fertility to all of the then known world. Out of the garden a stream of living water flowed to the surrounding lands.

It might not be accidental that in Genesis 2 the tree of life is mentioned first, before the water of life. From a logical point of view it should be the other way round: without water there cannot be any talk of tree growth. Both things, both blessings in creation go together; they are not available separately. But here in Genesis 2 emphasis is put on the tree of life, which is a picture of Christ Himself. He was the true righteous One, the Man who was blessed rightfully because He fully trusted in God (Ps. 1:3; Jer. 17:7-8). He was like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season. Christ died because of our sins and He was raised because of our justification (Rom. 4:25). As the glorified Lord in heaven He poured out the Holy Spirit here on earth. The Spirit could not come unless Jesus had been glorified (John 7:39).

Christ and the living water of the Spirit

Just as the tree and the water of life belong together, so also Christ and the Spirit; they cannot be separated from one another. But Scripture first of all emphasises the Person of Christ – truly Man and truly God – and the work He accomplished here on earth, on the basis of which the Holy Spirit was poured out. He came in order to glorify Christ. The Spirit came down to earth like a gentle rain, like a stream of living water. Water is a well-known biblical picture of the Spirit, as we see in the words of the prophet Isaiah. ‘For I will pour water on him who is thirsty, and floods on the dry ground; I will pour My spirit on your descendants, and My blessing on your offspring; they will spring up among the grass like willows by the watercourses’ (Isa. 44:3-4).

In Revelation 22 we first read about the river of water of life which proceeds from the throne of God and of the Lamb, then about the tree of life, standing not just on either side of the river but also in the middle of the street running straight through the new Jerusalem. The origin of the river is the throne of God and

of the Lamb, i.e., the dead and risen Lord (cf. Rev. 5). This means that the work of Christ is put before us here as the basis of the stream of blessing. The river proceeds from the throne of God *and* of the Lamb. The Spirit comes from the Father *and* from the Son, who became the Lamb of God here on earth (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:7).

Revelation 2:7 speaks about 'the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God'. No other trees are mentioned here. In this verse Christ promises the overcomers of the church of Ephesus to give them to eat from that tree. And we have no description of the river in this passage, which highlights only the tree of life. Those who overcome will be with their Lord in glory and 'feed' on Him. Even now God has given us eternal life, which we possess in Christ (1 John 5:11). But then He Himself will be our inheritance, and we will freely enjoy Him. He who is the Centre of all God's ways (cf. Rev. 5:6), is also the Centre of God's paradise. No one will ever be able to bar us from going to Him. There will not be a cherub with a flaming sword blocking the entrance. To be with Christ, to be in His presence, is far better (Phil. 1:23). This was what the Saviour Himself promised to the criminal who had been crucified with Him: 'Assuredly I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise' (Luke 23:43). That very day the undisturbed enjoyment of the tree of life would be his portion in the heavenly garden. How great it is to be for ever with the Lord! To this man the entrance was opened up by his faith in the crucified Christ, as it is for every person who trusts in the Lord Jesus Christ. The cleansing from sin and guilt and wearing the garments of salvation opens up the entrance to the paradise of God, so that we are entitled to enjoy the tree of life in all eternity: 'Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city' (Rev. 22:14 NASB).

The water of life is available to anybody who is thirsty

Another thing which should be said about the water of life can be found in Genesis 2, where we see that the paradise river did not only water the garden, but also provided the then existing world with water. It split up into four streams. The Pishon skirted the land of Havilah, 'where there is gold.' The river Gihon went around the land of Ethiopia, and the Tigris and Euphrates provided all of Mesopotamia with water (Gen. 2:10-13). The stream of living water was a source of refreshment for all the earth.

From a spiritual point of view this is no different. The water of life does not only meet our own needs as believers, it also flows out to spread blessing around us. It is not just a fountain of water within ourselves springing up into everlasting life, but the streams of living water also flow out of our hearts (John 4:14; 7:38). There is sufficient water to refresh a thirsty world; God's offer of grace bears a universal character. Therefore we find an invitation addressed to anyone who is thirsty. John writes in the book of Revelation: 'Let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely' (Rev. 22:17). The river of water of life does not only stream within the city, the new Jerusalem itself in order to refresh its citizens, the stream of blessing reaches much further and is available to those who are still outside. Salvation in Christ can be obtained freely. All those who thirst may come and drink (Isa. 55:1).

The four streams cover the whole world, so to speak. They must have been big and fast flowing rivers whose waters sprung up and roared, as appears from the names of the first three rivers. Pishon means 'stream', Gihon means 'the roaring one', and Tigris (or Hiddekel) probably also means 'fertile water', quite an apt meaning for flowing water which brings life and fertility. Because of the water, the earth brings forth grass, herbs and fruit trees (cf. Gen. 1:11-12). When we have become children of God and have been 'planted' in God's garden, we can bear fruit for Him (Rom. 7:4). Once we have 'eaten' from

the tree of life, i.e., have part with Christ Himself, we have received eternal life through Him. Then we can also grow in faith and – in a spiritual sense – become fruit trees planted by rivers of water. As we have seen, the water of life is a picture of the quickening Spirit who dwells in all true believers. The Spirit both quenches our own thirst and makes us bear fruit for God and our neighbour. According to the New Testament, the fruit of the Spirit is nine fold: '(...) love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control' (Gal. 5:22).

2. THE CHURCH AS GOD'S GARDEN NOW AND IN THE FUTURE

'A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse, a spring shut up, a fountain sealed. Your plants are an orchard of pomegranates with pleasant fruits, fragrant henna with spikenard, spikenard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes, with all the chief spices'.

Song of Solomon 4:12-14

The Paradise of God

The garden of Eden was God's garden, but because of man's fall into sin this earthly paradise was lost quite soon. However, there is another paradise now, a new and heavenly paradise, where believers who have fallen asleep are with Christ even now. This was what Christ promised the criminal crucified with Him: 'Today you will be with Me in Paradise' (Luke 23:43). The apostle Paul tells us that the believers hear *inexpressible* words there, which it is not lawful for a man on earth to utter (2 Cor. 12:4).

In the last book of the Bible this paradise is more or less expressly called the Paradise of God. Sin and Adam's failure with all its evil consequences will then have been banned for ever. Those who overcome in their struggles here on earth in God's strength, will for ever 'eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God' (Rev. 2:7). The tree of life is Christ Himself. He called Himself 'the green wood' (Luke 23:31). He could be compared to a 'tree planted by the rivers of water'

(Ps. 1:3). 'Eating' from this tree of life means feeding on His Person, partaking of His life. This picture expresses out total dependence on Him. In fact, this is all about a fundamental spiritual blessing which is the privilege of every believer. By faith we can 'feed' on Him and partake of His life, life eternal, even now. This will also be the case in heaven, although in a perfect manner. In the Paradise of God Himself, where sin and death have been done away with for ever, Christ feeds His own by having them 'eat from the tree of life'. Very soon this Paradise of God will descend from heaven – in the outward form of the New Jerusalem, the centre of divine government –, and in the future Kingdom of peace the tree and the water of life will serve for the well-being of mankind. The leaves of the tree will be for the healing of the nations (Rev. 22:2). Apparently, the eating of the fruit of the tree itself will be reserved for the heavenly saints, the inhabitants of the city (cf. Rev. 2:7; 22:14).

The Church of God

But we can also apply this in another, more actual way¹. There is more than just the distant past in Genesis, and the possibly very near future in Revelation. In the present dispensation the Church of God is His 'garden' on earth, even though, alas, this is not always clearly visible. According to God's thoughts, the Church is to be 'an enclosed garden' and 'a sealed fountain' for Him and the Lord Jesus Christ. These two pictures speak of complete separation from evil and of commitment to the

¹ Here we are speaking about a practical application of the Song of Solomon. Many expositors rightly stress that in the Old Testament the bride of the LORD is Israel. At mount Sinai they entered into a marriage covenant with Yahweh, and the journey through the wilderness was the time of betrothal (Jer. 2:2). The Church, however, is the bride of Christ, and the individual believer enjoys a distinct bond of love with Him.

heavenly Bridegroom. This leads us to the words which we find in the fourth chapter of the Song, as referred to above. There the bridegroom says about the bride: 'A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse, a spring shut up, a fountain sealed. Your plants are an orchard [litt. a paradise] of pomegranates with pleasant fruits, fragrant henna with spikenard, spikenard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes, with all the chief spices' (Song of Solomon 4:12-14).

We see that the bridegroom finds numerous fruits and precious things with his bride. The same thing can be said of the Church, the object of the Lord's joy. Her heavenly Owner finds His joy in her. Christ finds comfort in His 'garden' as in it He sees all kinds of excellent fruits, like pomegranates – in the Bible always linked with priestly service and the sanctuary. The fruit of the Spirit abounds there. Even precious spices and several fragrances can be found there, like cinnamon and calamus, spikenard and saffron, myrrh and aloes. These spices speak, among other things, of the 'spikenard' of our worship and the 'fragrance', the 'frankincense' of the spiritual offerings we offer up as believers (cf. Ps. 141:2; John 12:3; Rev. 8:3).

Besides water and tree fruits, the first paradise – or for that matter the land of Havilah where the river Pishon flowed – had still other resources, like high quality gold and gems: onyx stones. Further, a fragrant balsam resin, called bdellium could be found there (Gen. 2:12). Gold and gemstones speak of divine glory, majesty and splendour. We find them again in the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:18-21). The city has the glory of God, because He put this glory on it. The glorified Church is adorned with the glory of its Lord and Bridegroom. The fragrant balsam resin speaks of the holy frankincense which rises from the midst of the saints for the glory of God and the Lamb (cf. Rev. 5:8; 8:3). Our worship will then be all for Him only, in all eternity!

The temple and the city of God

Who will be able to enter this Paradise? In Revelation 2 and 3 the faithful believers are repeatedly called 'overcomers'. Within the failing Church there will always be people with an open ear to hear what the Holy Spirit is calling them to. The letters to the first three churches conclude with a promise of blessing to these 'remnants', but in the last four letters the overcomers are addressed first, and then the refrain follows: 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches'. This shows us that from Thyatira on, there will be no restoration possible for the Church as a whole. The Holy Spirit's expectations are focused only on the overcomers.

The church at Ephesus, the first one mentioned, represents the general position of the Church of God. The Lord presents Himself here in a general character. He wields power over the light bearers and walks in the midst of the golden lamp stands. To the overcomers the common Christian blessing is promised: partaking of the life which can be found only in Christ – eating from the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God (Rev. 2:7). Partaking of the Person of Christ leads to identification with Him and His glorious future.

This is described in a special way in the letter to Philadelphia. This church is not rebuked by the Lord. In obedience to His Word and in faithfulness to His name it had withdrawn from iniquity in the house of God and separated itself for Christ as the holy and true One. On this basis it expressed the truth of the Church according to Scripture. True enough, it had little strength, but soon the value of its faithfulness will be seen publicly. When the Church appears with Christ in glory, it will have a lasting place there, like the pillars Jachin and Boaz in the temple. That which it maintains in utter weakness now, will then be seen in perfection. This overcoming remnant will partake of the glory of the Lord, and the glory of the temple, and the city of God which will then come down from heaven (Rev. 3:10-12).

As a faithful remnant, Philadelphia even now expresses God's thoughts about the Church, but it also longs for the time when all those plans and thoughts will be gloriously fulfilled. While it sticks to the 'plan' of the Church as shown in the Word, it also realizes that this will be fulfilled in a glorious way soon: it is longing for the Paradise of God, for the New Jerusalem. So Philadelphia and the Church as it will be revealed in glory are closely linked together, as is confirmed by the promises made to those who will overcome: 'He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And My new name' (Rev. 3:12). Obviously, these seemingly weak believers are a symbol of strength in the temple of God as well as the recognized citizens of the heavenly city. Bearing the glorious names of God, of Christ and of the new Jerusalem speaks of union and identification, of recognition and manifestation. Our future is in this heavenly city, which has the glory of God and will lighten the earth with its shining splendour. In Revelation 21 and 22 this theme is elaborated further, and again we see the close unity between God and Christ on the one hand and the glorified Church on the other. We find a clear description here of its paradisiacal state and its blessings thanks to the presence of the tree and the water of life (Rev. 21:6; 2:1-2, 14).

3. WITH CHRIST IN PARADISE

'Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him (...) But the other, answering (...) said to Jesus, 'Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom'. And Jesus said to him, 'Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in paradise'.

Luke 23:39-43

Our Lord's last will

As far as we can derive from the Gospels, the Lord said or cried something seven times while hanging at the cross. Three of those words were spoken before the three hours of darkness, three of them afterwards. During the three hours of darkness – almost at their close – we hear only one word, the cry of the suffering Christ quoting from Psalm 22: 'My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?' (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34). In this way the Lord expressed the immeasurable suffering of being forsaken by God, which He had to endure because of our sins.

In a sense, these seven words form the last will, the spiritual testament of the dying Redeemer. Especially the first three words at the cross are a strong testimony to the value and the power of Christ's work, for in them we already hear about the results of His sufferings. They show us the spiritual riches He has left to His own on the basis of His finished work, three blessings which have been granted by virtue of His death:

- (1) The forgiveness of sins for evildoers, according to the Lord's prayer to His Father in Luke 23:34.

- (2) A place in Paradise, according to the promise in Luke 23:43.
- (3) A place of caring love in the midst of God's 'family' here on earth, as indicated in John 19:26-27.

So we see that the Lord's last will is about spiritual goods, spiritual blessings to be received by His own as a result of His death. He is the Testator who takes care of the past, the present and the future. So we have here, in a somewhat different order:

- (1) As far as our past is concerned, our sins have been washed away by His precious blood.
- (2) As far as the present is concerned, He grants us a place of safety and security in the midst of the family of God's children.
- (3) As far as the future is concerned, God's Paradise in heaven is open to us. What else could we desire?

Today you will be with Me in Paradise

Now we want to consider the second word at the cross, which encompasses the promise of a place in the heavenly Paradise: 'Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.' The Lord spoke with divine authority. 'Assuredly' is literally 'Amen' in the original. There cannot be any doubt about the fulfilment of this promise. Though He was crucified in weakness, yet He lives by the power of God. He fulfils His promises. From this verse four conclusions can be drawn:

- (1) No interval (of purification and cleansing) is necessary for a deceased believer to reach bliss, for the Lord told the criminal that he would be with Him in Paradise that very day. The sleep of death is only for the body, which rests in the grave until the day of the resurrection. Implicitly, this refutes the teaching of a so-called sleep of

- the soul, that contends that the departed saints find themselves in a kind of 'sleep' until the resurrection day.
- (2) On the contrary, those who die in Christ, are in His immediate presence now and they are aware of it. 'Today you will be with Me in Paradise,' was the Lord's promise to the criminal who believed in Him. This man was expecting the Messianic Kingdom. He believed that the Lord was the King of the Jews, and that He would receive His Kingdom at God's time; a Kingdom with a place for resurrected saints as well, and he hoped that he might count on the favour of the King then. Instead, he got something far better – a place in God's Paradise, where he could recline at table in the presence of the Lord that very day.
 - (3) In Luke 16 the place of blessing after death is called 'Abraham's bosom', but that was *before* the Lord Jesus had accomplished His work of redemption. Since His resurrection and glorification at the right hand of God, Abraham, the 'father' of all believers, is no longer the focus of attention. Being with *Christ*, that is the best part now, and not only in the interval between death and resurrection. In the resurrection of the dead and the transformation of the believers who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, at the rapture of the Church, we have the same promise: '(...) and thus we shall always be *with the Lord*' (1 Thess. 4:17).
 - (4) This place of blessing will be called 'Paradise', because it is the heavenly counterpart of the Garden of Eden. Christ will be there as the true Tree of life, and the Holy Spirit will be there as the Fountain of living water, so that the thirst and the hunger of the heart will be provided for in every aspect. Those who have fallen asleep in Christ are enjoying unspeakable bliss there even now.

4. WITH PAUL IN PARADISE

'I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord: I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago – whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows – such a one was caught up to the third heaven. And I know such a man – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows – how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities'.

2 Corinthians 12:1-5

A man in Christ

Because in Corinth false teachers and apostles found acceptance, Paul felt obliged to make a stand against them. These misleading workers were boasting of 'the flesh', that is, of their own descent, honour and esteem as natural people. Paul, however, did not want to boast of himself, but only of 'a man in Christ'. What did he mean by this? If by faith a person is linked with Christ, God no longer looks at him in his natural state as a child of Adam. That person is 'in Christ', which means that he is closely linked with Him, united with Him. He is standing before God on a *new* basis, that of the resurrection and the freedom of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1-2). Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is 'a new creation' – which was the only thing that counted for the apostle (2 Cor. 5:16-17; Gal. 6:12-16).

So when boasting about this person – a man in Christ – we do not speak about ourselves, our own honour or status. All this

disappears in the light of the knowledge of Christ, who surpasses them all (Phil. 3:8). Neither do we speak about any spectacular experiences of our own (an ascension into heaven or – as some even dare to claim – a ‘descent into hell’), boasting about extrabiblical revelations. All this is utterly unimportant and even misleading. A ‘man in Christ’ owes everything to Christ, to His death, resurrection and ascension, and therefore, these things ought to be stressed; that is what characterises our new position as believers. We have been crucified with Christ, have died with Him, have been buried with Him, but we have also been raised with Him and even placed in the heavenlies in Him. In Him, ‘a man in Christ’ is put before God as perfect and complete (Eph. 1:4-6; 2:6; Col. 2:10). This is not the place of natural man, of mankind fallen in sin, it is the place of all those who are in Christ and have been united with Him. This means that in principle, this is the actual position of each and every true believer as ‘a man in Christ’.

However, the glory of this place and position will be revealed at a later stage. Therefore the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God (Rom. 8:19). We owe our position before God to the heavenly Man with whom we are connected, for ‘as is the heavenly Man, so also are those who are heavenly’ (1 Cor. 15:48). This will be seen gloriously – also regarding our bodies – at the second coming of Christ. As we have borne the image of the first mortal man of dust, Adam, so we shall also bear the image of the glorified Man in heaven, the last Adam (1 Cor. 15:49).

When Paul spoke about ‘visions and revelations of the Lord’ (2 Cor. 12:1), he meant the real thing, not some imagination or human concoction. I think there is also a link with the vision by which the apostle had been called, as we find it in the book of Acts (ch. 9, 22, 26). When the light from heaven shone around him, Paul for the first time understood that this Jesus whom he was persecuting, as the Head in heaven was united with all those on earth who belong to Him. Christ lives in the members of His body on earth, and they, in turn, are united with Him as

their Head in heaven. Christ in us, and we in Christ, that is the mystery of the Church of which Paul had become a steward.

In contrast with the publicity such experiences sometimes get in our day, Paul did not boast in the revelations he had received. He rarely spoke about them. It had been fourteen years ago that he was caught up into Paradise – a period of time which is, remarkably enough, also mentioned in Galatians 2:1. The apostle gave *Christ* His due honour by calling himself just 'a man in Christ'. As a result of the work of Christ all true believers are united with Him in heaven. The Head in heaven represents all His members. There where He is, we are also placed before God. As 'men in Christ', we have been made accepted and well pleasing in the Beloved. The home of all true believers is the third heaven, and after the rapture of the Church this will become reality to the full.

Paradise and the third heaven

The third heaven is the 'heaven of heavens' (Ps. 148:4), the dwelling place of God. Here we can think of the pattern of the temple and the tabernacle: after the court and the holy place followed the Most Holy Place – the inner sanctuary. This was the place where God was enthroned and where on the Day of Atonement reconciliation was brought about by the blood of the sin offerings which the priest brought into the presence of God (Lev. 16; Heb. 13:11).

Then the apostle says that he has also been caught up into Paradise (2 Cor. 12:3-4). I do not think he means a totally different place than the third heaven about which he spoke first. Presumably, it is a part of the third heaven. He is speaking about the same person (a man in Christ), and Paul repeats that he does not know whether it happened in the body or out of the body. When speaking about *Paradise*, we mean especially the enjoyment and the blessings of this place. This heavenly garden is full of God's glory, and that is why Paul speaks about

the 'inexpressible words' that can be heard there, the meaning of which we shall deal with below.

Caught up in or outside the body

Paul was caught up into the third heaven, and this must have been something which happened to him all of a sudden, as is indicated by the verb that he used ('snatch away' or 'rob'; cf. Matt. 11:12; John 10:12,28-29; Acts 8:39; 23:10; 1 Thess. 4:17; Jude 23; Rev. 12:5). This 'being caught up' may have been a kind of ecstasy, a rapture (cf. Acts 22:17 and 2 Cor. 5:13), but it may also have happened in reality 'in the body'. The story of Philip the evangelist confirms that the latter is not impossible at all – the Spirit of the Lord took him away (caught him away), so that the eunuch saw him no more (Acts 8:39). This is important for the subject we have before us, because very soon we as believers shall be caught up all of a sudden from the earth to meet the Lord in the air. That will *not* be an ecstasy, but it will happen 'in the body' – in the transformed bodies of those who will have lived to see the coming of the Lord, and in the resurrected bodies of those who will sleep in Jesus. According to the apostle Paul, this will take place at the rapture of the Church (1 Thess. 4:15-17). The Church will be taken away from the earth at an *unexpected* moment. That is why it is generally called the 'rapture'.

Twice Paul says that he really does not know whether it happened in our outside the body, 'God knows' (2 Cor. 12:2-3). It was known to God alone. In the last Bible book it is said of John a few times that he was 'in the Spirit' or 'carried away in the Spirit' (Rev. 1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10). Obviously, this happened outside the body, although he was able to observe in great detail what he saw and heard after having 'come up' into heaven (Rev. 4:1). Paul, however, was 'raptured' from the earth so quickly that he was unable to determine whether it was an ecstasy or reality (cf. also Acts 12:9). Both could have been the

case, and from a biblical point of view both of them *are* true. The deceased believers are 'outside the body' with Christ in Paradise even now, but soon they, like we, the living who will remain until the coming of the Lord, will indeed be caught up 'in the body' into the third heaven and into the Father's house. And thus we shall always be *with the Lord!*

Four inexpressible things

Then we too – and who knows how soon – shall be witnesses of the unspeakable words which can be heard up there. Paul does not explain by whom these words were uttered, by heavenly saints, by angels or by God Himself. This remains a mystery to us. In the last book of the Bible we hear a lot of statements and prophetic revelations made by persons in heaven. Apparently, they do not fall into this category of 'unspeakable words'. John had to seal up only the things which were uttered by the seven thunders (Rev. 10:4).

We have no reason to assume that Paul had been unable to understand these 'unspeakable words'. On the contrary, they were special or 'extraordinary' revelations which he obviously understood (2 Cor. 12:7). Otherwise he would not have needed a thorn in the flesh, because he would not have run the risk of self-exaltation and self-glorifying. Perhaps it is better to think of the numerous revelations which Paul received regarding the truth of Christ and the Church, and the mysteries about the future, such as the restoration of Israel, the rapture of the Church, and the like. Many of these have been written down by Paul in his epistles. Their unspeakable character would then be related to the divine, heavenly nature of these mysteries as *experienced in Paradise*. But no human being on earth is allowed to express this heavenly experience in words, although it is true that the Holy Spirit guided Paul and the other apostles into all divine truth even here on earth (John 16:13). Anyway, without a doubt the apostle truly got to know these heavenly

revelations, which all of us soon shall know to the full (1 Cor. 13:12). While he was in heaven there was no problem whatsoever enjoying these revelations. But as soon as he was back on earth he needed a thorn in the flesh (possibly an eye disease, cf. Gal. 4:13-15), so that he would not be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations. Being on earth, Paul was not yet perfect.

The deceased believers in Paradise are enjoying these glorious, heavenly things to the full even now. Their happiness and bliss as such do not differ from the realities in the eternal state, for immediately upon his depart the Christian is *with Christ* (Phil. 1:23), and that is what determines his bliss. In this respect Scripture does not make any difference between the intermediate state and the eternal state; neither does it do so with a view to the unbelievers – the seriousness and the pains in Hades and in the lake of fire are put on the same level (cf. Luke 16).

Here on earth we are enjoying our portion as Christians, since we rejoice in Christ even now 'with joy *inexpressible* and full of glory' (1 Pet. 1:8). It is somewhat difficult to put this heavenly joy into words, but we see its radiance for example on Stephen's face (Acts 6:15; 7:55). We can also continually thank our God and Father for His '*indescribable* gift' (2 Cor. 9:15) – the gift of His beloved Son as well as the gift of the Holy Spirit (John 4:10; 7:38-39; 14:26). Who can measure the riches of these divine gifts? Moreover, in the present time it is the Spirit Himself who prays and intercedes for us 'with groanings which *cannot be uttered*' (Rom. 8:26). The indwelling Spirit makes intercession in our hearts according to the will of God' – this is divine intercession for the *saints* (Rom. 8:27). So even here on earth the indescribable gifts of a triune God are available to us!

5. WITH JOHN IN PARADISE

'Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city'.

Revelation 22:14 NASB²

The bliss of entering the holy city

This is the last 'beatitude' in the book of Revelation (altogether, the book contains seven of them), and it refers to entering the New Jerusalem, the heavenly capital of the Kingdom of peace (cf. Heb. 12:22-24). This beatitude tells us about an important condition of entering the city, namely doing His commandments (or, as the NASB puts it, the washing of one's garments), and we also read what the citizenship of the heavenly city implies: (1) the right to enjoy the tree of life, and (2) entering through the gates into the city. Both privileges – partaking of Christ and dwelling within the gates of the heavenly city, the Church in glory – are granted to us by faith.

Then we also find the other side of the picture concerning the others – those who are outside. And what an enormous contrast: 'But outside are dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and whoever loves and practices a lie' (Rev. 22:15). This means that in the heavenly

² In our comments on Revelation 22:14 we will follow those versions that speak about the blessing of washing our robes in order to have the right to the tree of life.

city divine holiness is maintained very strictly indeed. Quite obviously, there is an 'inside' and an 'outside', both marked by a definite status. The wording reminds us of what Paul writes about the present boundaries of the Church here on earth (cf. 1 Cor. 5:12-13). In the book of Nehemiah we find a passage describing how the people praised all those men who went to live in Jerusalem: 'Now the city was large and spacious, but the people in it were few' (Neh. 7:4; 11:1-2). In the heavenly Jerusalem there will be an entirely different situation. The time to make a choice will then be a thing of the past. An innumerable crowd of people will inhabit the city. And here we have *the Lord* praising the inhabitants of the city. It is He Himself who is speaking in these verses from Revelation 22:6 on. Both beatitudes in this chapter come from the mouth of the Lord Himself.

The washing of our garments is the condition upon which we can receive the citizenship of the heavenly Zion. It speaks of the complete cleansing by the blood of Christ and of the change in lifestyle that results from it. In the eulogy in the first chapter of the book of Revelation we read that He *washed* us from our sins in His own blood (1:5). Some manuscripts put here that He *redeemed* us from our sins by His blood. The first reading points to the means that was necessary for our cleansing, the latter speaks about the great price that had to be paid for our redemption. The blood of Christ was necessary both for our redemption (as is also confirmed in Rev. 5:9), and for our cleansing. Of the believers who come out of the great tribulation it is said, '(...) and [they] washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb' (Rev. 7:14). This means that they *themselves* washed their robes in order to make them white in the blood of the Lamb. This active form of the verb is also used in the last chapter of the book: 'Blessed are those who wash their garments' (Rev. 22:14). This would emphasize our own responsibility to come to God with confession of guilt and in self-judgment, but also in sincere faith in the means of redemption which God has given. There is no other means of

cleansing and having one's sins forgiven – the blood of Jesus Christ, Gods Son, cleanses us from *all* sin (1 John 1:7).

The results of our purification

There is a twofold result of the washing of our garments. The cleansing by the blood of the Lamb grants us (1) the right to eternal life (by eating of the tree of life), and (2) the entrance into the New Jerusalem. We receive power over, or the right to [the food of] the tree of life, as well as the authority to enter into the city through the gates. These privileges will be refused the unbelievers (Rev. 22:19).

In the preceding vision of the heavenly city we find a clear description of these things. The apostle John enjoyed the privilege of being taken up into heaven and of seeing the bride, the wife of the Lamb – the heavenly Jerusalem – in all her brilliant beauty (Rev. 4:1-2; 21:9-22:5). Heaven was opened for him, and he climbed up – enraptured by the Spirit (litt. 'in the Spirit') – and saw a throne in heaven. The throne speaks of God's righteous government and the reign of the Lamb. At the end of the book of Revelation however, we discover that the throne is also the source of happiness and blessing. From the throne of God and of the Lamb proceeds the river of water of life, and in the middle of the city's street, and on either side of the river, is the tree of life, which yields its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree will be for the healing of the nations.

This metaphor about the tree of life is based on the first chapters of the book of Genesis. We also find it in the promise given to those in Ephesus who will overcome (Rev. 2:7). Eating of the fruit of the tree of life is a picture of partaking of Christ – like eating of the bread of life. In a figurative sense, we have to feed on Him in order to receive the true life from God and to maintain it (cf. John 6).

The picture of the city gates through which we must enter into the city of God, is based on the book of Isaiah. The gates were the place where justice was administered. They were the only

possibility to enter into the city; only the righteous would enter through them (cf. Isa. 26:1-2; 60:1-22). Our lawful place as believers is within the safe walls of the city which God has prepared, and His authority is protecting His own. Thus we will always be with the Lord, and be before the throne of God and of the Lamb to serve and to honour Him. Will you also share in these blessings?

The tree of life in the midst

The first thing John saw in heaven after having been enraptured by the Spirit, was the throne and the One sitting on it (Rev. 4:2) – the throne of God and of the Lamb, that is Christ (Rev. 22:1). In Revelation 5:6 we see the Lamb standing in the midst of the throne. Here in Revelation 22 John sees the river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. The Lamb is the source of life – life flows from Him as a quickening stream. Christ is our life (Col. 3:4).

This vision reminds us of the temple river which in the coming Kingdom of peace will flow from the temple, i.e., from the place of the throne of the God of Israel (Ezek. 47:1-12). Several other details in Revelation 22 echo this as well. During the millennium the heavenly realities, which surpass our minds and our knowledge, will be mirrored in the blessings of the earth. On either side of the river, and also in the middle of the street of the holy city, John saw the tree (or: trees) of life. Here the river and the trees fringing it are linked with the street (this is singular!) of the heavenly city. Obviously, the river flows along the street of pure gold. The street would remind us of Christ as the Way, while the river would first and foremost speak of cleansing and refreshing. The slain Lamb is the Source of the water of life, which cleanses us by giving us new life (cf. John 3:5). But we see how the tree of life, in the middle of the street and on either side of the river, is closely linked with it (Rev. 22:2). This would speak of a *fruitful* life, a life which is shared with others.

In Scripture a tree is often a symbol of a great human power on earth (see, for example, Daniel 4). However, Christ is the tree of life in the Jerusalem which is *above*. He is the mighty Prince of life, who grants life to whomever He wants (John 5:21; 17:2). And the life given by Him is fit for heaven. If we know Him by faith, then in Him we possess eternal life and are perfectly fit to appear in God's presence. Christ Himself is the eternal life which was with the Father and has been revealed to us (1 John 1:2). He went into death for us in order to be able to give us life – life of a new order, life which overcomes death and can enter into heaven. This life has been given to us by faith in His Name. Thus Christ has become the Head of a new generation of men: as is the Heavenly, so are those who are heavenly (1 Cor. 15:48).

In the heavenly Jerusalem we see only the tree of life; nowhere in the last book of the Bible the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is mentioned. Just as the tree of life had been planted in the midst of the Garden of Eden, Christ is the Centre of the Paradise of God (Rev. 2:7). Here Christ is the Centre of blessing, of life and of worship for all His own. No sin is found here, no failure, no accusing conscience, no judgment, no death, no chasing man away from the presence of God – all these things do no longer play any role. Christ took all negative consequences of the eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil upon Himself, so to speak, and thus became the 'tree of life' for all those who belong to Him. Jesus in the midst, Jesus alone!

(on the back of the cover)

Once Adam and Eve were driven from the Garden of Eden where they had been placed, an angel with a flaming sword blocked the entry to this paradise on earth for ever. For man, who had fallen into sin, any return to it had become impossible. Yet God has given something better in return as the obedience of Christ has more far-reaching consequences than the disobedience of Adam. Christ's finished work at Calvary's cross grants us the entrance into another, a new, heavenly paradise – the paradise of God Himself in heaven!

In the New Testament this place of bliss is mentioned just three times. However, what it says about it is quite important. It is these statements this booklet is all about. It sheds light on the unsearchable riches of both the Person and the work of Christ.