

The Final Exam

Dear Friend,

Many people think God is going to give them a final exam when they get to heaven. If they don't pass, they go to the other place, called hell. The fact is Jesus has already taken the exam for us and has gotten a perfect score. Ephesians 2:8-10 tells us how this happened, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."

When we have received God's gift of grace provided through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we realize we are His workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works. This lays out the final exam Jesus gives in Matthew 25:31-46.

There we find in this final exam, as individuals redeemed through the shed blood of Jesus Christ on the cross, six questions. They include the following which shows whether or not we performed the good works "which God prepared beforehand."

1. Were you a friend of Jesus when he was hungry?
2. Were you a friend of Jesus when he was thirsty?
3. Were you a friend of Jesus when he was a stranger (homeless)?
4. Were you a friend of Jesus when he was naked?
5. Were you a friend of Jesus when he was sick?
6. Were you a friend of Jesus when he was in jail?

To love Jesus is to love all of those individuals who need our care. Out of all the people in the world Jesus chose to identify with the hungry, thirsty unclothed, sick, imprisoned, and homeless when He said in Matthew 25:35-36, "When I was hungry, you gave me something to eat, and when I was thirsty you gave me something to drink. When I was a stranger, you welcomed me, and when I was naked, you gave me clothes to wear. When I was sick, you took care of me, and when I was in jail, you visited me" (Contemporary English Version).

To those who pass this final exam, Jesus says in verse 34, "Come and receive the Kingdom that was prepared for you before the world was created."

The person who has received Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior will experience the new birth resulting in moral character that is revealed by acts of charity. This is outward evidence demonstrating the new creation spoken of in 2 Corinthians 5:17 where it says, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!”

This newness that comes forth produces good works which glorify God. Such is possible because of the radical reorientation of a life of selfishness to one of service through the miracle of regeneration. When a person is in Christ God totally restructures their life, changing their whole fabric, including thinking, feeling and acting.

Those who pass the final exam, and are blessed by God with eternal life, are the ones who have ministered to Jesus. The examples Jesus gives in this final exam before the great white throne of judgment, involve the works of mercy among the poor, sick, homeless and incarcerated. This is not salvation by works, but the fruit of righteousness that demonstrates one’s right relationship with God through Christ.

Jesus tells the righteous in Matthew 25:35-36, “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”

The righteous seem surprised that they have passed the final exam. This is not because they are said to have known Jesus but because Jesus said they have ministered directly to Him. Jesus explains that whenever they did these acts of compassion, “for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it for me” (v. 40).

In order to pass the final exam and minister to Jesus we must be at home with him. Then we can create a home of compassion for others. Having a place to call home was so important that God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. He brought the Children of Israel out of Egypt, through the wilderness into a place called the Promised Land. Not only does Jesus desire to give His homeless children a place in this life but one for all eternity. In John 14:2-3 Jesus said, “In My Father’s house are many mansions, if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also.”

God creates a home, a place of acceptance, and belonging. Sin destroys, displaces and uproots. God redeems, restores and reunites our homeless lives to His Son, the Homecoming King Jesus Christ. He heals, restores and declares, “The Kingdom of God is at hand” (Luke 10:9, 11). Through Jesus death and resurrection, He demonstrates, He is “the Way, the truth and the Life” (John 14:6). The One who “has gone to prepare a place for us,” Jesus not only makes it possible for us to come to our Heavenly Father but through the power of the Holy Spirit infuses us with purpose and a sense of belonging.

New Life Evangelistic Center sees all human beings as individuals who are created in the image of God with a purpose and a sense of belonging. New Life believes, as the Scripture says, that “God places the lonely in families” (Ps 68:6). For many this family is the New Life Evangelistic Center Community where individuals are challenged to live out their God given calling or purpose. NLEC by its very efforts to provide a home within the Biblical context is considered a threat to the shallow government claims that it can end chronic homelessness by placing a few in housing and leave the vast majority of the homeless to wander the streets without shelter and purpose.

When people who were previously without a place were asked, “after being homeless, what does it mean to you to be in the NLEC Family and have a purpose for your life,” Amy said, “It means a lot to me because otherwise I might have to sleep outside, and it is not safe for a woman or a man. I would probably be drinking in the park and getting into trouble.” Bill P. said, “It’s good to be a part of a Christian Community and helping the homeless.”

Unless you have been uprooted and left without a place or a purpose, you really won’t understand what it means to individuals like Carol to have a place to call home at New Life Evangelistic Center. She writes, “It feels great to finally have a place where I feel wanted and loved and needed to do God’s work.” Debra says, “It’s a blessing to have a safe place to go where there is no crime.”

These individuals who were once homeless have now found a place at New Life with brothers and sisters who are letting the love of Christ flow through them. Dwight writes, “At NLEC I have found a place to fellowship, worship, work and build a more positive prospective.” Victoria says, “When I didn’t have anywhere else to go, New Life opened its doors for me and welcomed me.”

Bouma – Prediger and Walsh explain it this way in their book *Beyond Homelessness*. They point out that a place called home is created “when the homeless recognize that the resurrected one is the gardener of the new creation, the new Adam” (John 20:15; 1 Cor. 15:45; Romans 5:12-21). They are able to thrive in this home when one confesses “Jesus as Lord, the one who was rendered homeless on a Roman cross and resurrected with homemaking power on the third day” (Matt. 28; Luke 24; Mark 16; John 20). As this takes place “they recognize that this Jesus is the image of the invisible God and that in Him all of creation is redeemed and humanity is called to be renewed and restored as God’s homemaking image – bearers, embodying in their lives the homemaking virtues of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience forgiveness and love” (Col. 1:15-20; 3:10,12-14). When one experiences the resurrected Christ “the peace of this Christ rules in their hearts and the word of Christ dwells in them so richly and so deeply that they begin to shape dwellings (homes) of hospitality, justice, and shalom” (Col. 3:15-16; Eph. 2: 11-22).

All of us long for that perfect home among perfect people. Yet even in the best of situations where we desire at NLEC to be home makers rather than home breakers, often chaos and confusion can seem to reign. At moments like that instead of giving up we have discovered we need to once again return to Gen. 1:2. There in the midst of the chaos and empty darkness, the spirit hovered over such, resulting in order and creation. We have learned that letting the Holy Spirit hover involves first submitting our demands in community life to the Risen Christ and then trusting Him to allow His love to flow through us even to those we don’t feel deserve such love. After all, when we spell out the name Jesus, we see the last 2 letters are “us” not “me”.

Each year Jesus brings thousands of hurting and homeless people to His NLEC house of refuge. As He gives them a place and a purpose many respond like DeSalvo does when he says, “This is a place for a second chance, where you can start over with structure, love and teamwork.” Martha writes, “New Life gives you stability, family, a place to belong.” Carol adds, “NLEC isn’t just a homeless shelter. It has become my home. I have learned so much about God. I finally have a family who cares about me.”

We have been given the answer to the Final Exam that will be given. Jesus with the outstretched hands of the waiting Father invites the prodigals, the displaced, the lost and the lonely with the words, “Come unto me all you who are overwhelmed, homeless, and frustrated and I will give you rest. I will provide a home, a place of refuge for you.” We can receive this invitation, or we can insist on journeying through life with no place for our heart to call home and no purpose we can call our own. If we have received this invitation, then we will want to minister to Jesus by directly helping those in need.

Not only does Christ invite us to experience the hope of our heavenly home but he also invites us during this journey on earth to be a part of His community of fellow believers, called the body of Christ. Such a community is where Christ’s interactive love is at work. This community provides the roots, which Simone Weil describes. “To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul. It is one of the hardest to define. A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active, and natural participation in the life of a community.”

For over 50 years New Life Evangelistic Center has sought, through the grace of God, to provide a place where the homeless and hurting can establish roots. It works to be a place where the love of Jesus Christ can give them roots, direction, and purpose. As this takes place a home is created where one is transformed from being a tumble weed blowing across the dry terrain, to becoming a caring individual who is rooted in the love, power and purpose that Christ provides.

With God’s love at work through the provision of a home at NLEC, Brian writes, “to stay here makes the transition back into society that much easier. It is great knowing you have a place like New Life that you can go to after a hard day of work. The support you get being rooted in one place helps ease the burden of not knowing where your next meal is coming from or where you are going to sleep. God’s love is working through His people at NLEC, and it all comes together when you are rooted in one place.”

Robert Frost in his work, *Death of a Hired Man* wrote, “home is the place when you have to go there, they have to take you.” Karen says, “It feels good to be in an environment that serves and believes in the power of God and prayer. God has provided for me and many others who have come to New Life Evangelistic Center for help.”

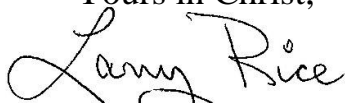
The choice now belongs to each and every one of us. With yearning hearts and restless anxious spirits, we can try to find peace and security in a job, another person, a car, or a big screen TV. The problem is they will never satisfy, nor will they help us pass the final exam. So, we can continue searching, drifting like tumble weeds across the terrain of life in a culture of dislocation. Yet we know in the depths of our soul there must be something better, something secure, someone in this vast universe we can turn to and find peace and hope.

Can you hear Jesus inviting you to participate in a Homecoming far above and beyond your wildest dreams? Are you able to stop drifting long enough to let His still small voice invite you home as He says, “Come to me all of you who are worn out as a result of your homelessness, and I will give you a home in my presence and peace”.

I know that as I have responded to that invitation, I have experienced a peace, a sense of belonging and purpose that passes all understanding. I wish I could tell you I was constantly abiding in His presence and experiencing the satisfaction of being at home. The fact is I must admit that I often let anxiety, fear and worry drive me back out into the streets of despair. But thank God for the Holy Spirit who awakens me to my need to return home to the love of God. Such a return takes place as I pray and meditate upon God’s Word in the Bible and His Works of Creation and let an attitude of gratitude sweep over me. As I do this it lets God’s love and compassion flow through me into the lives of hurting people. Then I can minister to Jesus and by His grace pass that Final Exam found in Matthew 25:31-46.

As a sojourner passing through this life, all of us long for that day when we will be with our Heavenly Father, at home for all eternity. Thank God this is possible for us through Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection. Now is the time for each of us to experience Christ’s redemptive homecoming in this culture of dislocation. We can do this by telling Him we are tired of wandering homeless through life, and that we want to come home to Him now. As we do this, we must let God’s love continue to flow through us as we work together to pass that Final Exam of ministering to Jesus by daily helping the hurting and homeless.

Yours in Christ,


Larry Rice