

The Great White Throne Judgment (Part 3)

Revelation 20:11-15

Sunday, 26 March 2017

[Note: Some parts of this teaching are from John MacArthur's sermons on Revelation 20:11-15.]

The Christians today should be the generation that needs to read and study the book of Revelation because we are the generation that is nearest to the return of Christ. But sadly, most Christians never study the book of Revelation.

But that is not really surprising because most preachers also don't teach the book of Revelation, except chapters 2 and 3 that contain the letters to the seven churches. Once in a while worship leaders or song leaders read chs. 4 and 5 at the end of congregational singing, but those are the only portions in Revelation that most Christians are exposed to.

This is unfortunate because people who don't understand and obey the truths of Revelation miss the great blessing that is promised at the very beginning of this book. Revelation 1:3 says, *"Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near."*

Please take note of that phrase at the end of that verse: *"For the time is near."* I believe that every church should teach this book to their members. Every Christian from now on should study this book, for the time is nearer to the return of Christ. As to how near, I do not know. Since our generation is the closest to His return we should be interested to know the most important events that will affect the whole world. This is more important than climate change, political wrangling, economic growth, territorial disputes, drug concerns, and traffic problems.

The book of Revelation contains tremendous truth about the return of Christ, the establishing of His kingdom, the final judgment, and God's dwelling with His people in the eternal kingdom. These are truths that constitute the blessed hope of the believer, and so God wants all Christians to know about them.

But honestly, no teacher has a perfect understanding of the events that will happen in the future nor can anyone place them in neat order. The more I study this book, the more I realize that there are many things we do not know and that we are not absolutely certain of.

For example, no one is absolutely certain if Jesus will return before, in the middle or after the Tribulation. This is why up to now theologians are still debating this issue. No one is absolutely certain when demons will be judged or how the saints will be involved in judging them? No one is certain who will constitute the mortal humans who will enter the millennium? No one can say for

sure when the mortal humans who will be saved during the millennium be glorified and evaluated for their works? How about the infants who were born dead? Will they also face the Great White Throne judgment?

Christians may be ignorant of many things regarding the future and they may disagree with the details and the chronology of the events, but that should not stop us from trying our best to understand what God has already revealed in His Word, especially those truths found in Revelation. *Dt 29:29* says, "*The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.*"

The most important thing is to get the central truth that in the future Jesus is going to return and God is going to judge the world through Him, and that this final judgment is certain to come. All humans are going to be resurrected and after the final judgment, they will either be thrown into the lake of fire or placed in the new earth in the eternal kingdom and live with God forever.

And let's now continue in our study of Rev 20:11-15, the most sobering and serious scene in all of the Bible because we are looking at the final judgment, the Great White Throne Judgment. It is the day in which all human beings, both the godly and ungodly, from the time of Adam to the end of the millennium will face judgment.

On the one hand, the godly will receive confirmation that they are truly saved because their names will be found in the book of life. They will also lose or gain rewards depending on the character of their works. On the other hand, the ungodly will receive confirmation that they are really lost because their names will not be in the book of life. They will also be sentenced to eternal condemnation in hell and receive their due punishment based on their works.

As we return to our passage in Revelation, chapter 20:11-15, remember that there are four elements that we're looking at here: *scene, summons, standard, sentence*. (As I said, I borrowed this outline from John MacArthur).

As I said last week, one is of the things that is really surprising about this passage is the absence of detail. I was reading a preview of a fiction written by J. B. Phillips entitled *The Great White Throne*. Listen to how he describes the Great White Throne that one of his main characters saw in his dream:

I stood before a man on a throne. I couldn't see his face or much of anything else, because something bright blazed before me. I felt like I was staring at a supernova. I tried closing my eyes, pressing my hands over them. The light still blazed into me. There was no escape. The throne was pearly smooth. Its surface faded into the sea of white around me. The man might have had a beard. He might have worn a robe and a crown. ... [His eyes] were like universes of galaxies and stars concentrated into marble spheres. Now that I could see those eyes, I felt exposed. I felt guilty. I also felt fear. Deep, paralyzing fear.

In John's description of the Great White Throne, there are no picturesque descriptions. They are all written in very plain words.

SCENE

First, let's review the **SCENE**, found in Rev 20:11-12: *"Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. 12 And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne."* That's the scene. (Did you notice that the words are mostly monosyllables.)

There's a great white throne, and God in Christ or Christ in God (Jn 14:10-11) is sitting on it, and from the glorious, divine presence, earth and heaven disappear and no place is found for them. And as I said last time, this means uncreation; the universe disappears into non-existence.

It is here that what Scripture says "heaven and earth will pass away," is fulfilled. Just as God brought them into existence, they go out of existence. Or in the words of Peter in 2Peter 3:10,12:

10 the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved ... 12 heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn!

So the creation is uncreated. There's no earth left. There's no universe, nothing's left. As the universe dissolves, Hades and the grave dissolve with it. And there is yet no new heaven and new earth, and so the only place that all of the godly and the ungodly could be at this point of time is to appear before God's throne.

SUMMONS

We now come to the second feature in this vision, the **SUMMONS**. Look at verse 13, *"And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them."* There's the summons.

This is the actual giving up of the dead by the sea and by Death and Hades. From another perspective you could say that all the dead in the sea and in Death and Hades are summoned. [A "summons" is an authoritative call or order to appear before a judge or magistrate.] All the dead are called and gathered before God in the Last Judgment and no one is left out.

First it says, *And the sea gave up the dead*. All who drowned or were buried or whose ashes were scattered at the sea, all who died in the universal Flood, all who went down with the Titanic or sea vessel that has sunk into the sea, or all who have been eaten by the fish will be summoned. They will be called and gathered to face God before the Great White Throne.

And then *Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them*. Rev 1:18 says that Jesus has the keys of Death and Hades. In Rev 6:7, during the fourth seal judgment, Death and Hades are personified. Death is followed by Hades which resulted in widespread death.

"Death" here may refer to the *state of death*. It is a physical condition which is opposite of being alive.

"Hades" refers to the *place of death*. Hades is the NT equivalent of the OT Sheol. There are also texts that indicate that it is the place of the wicked (e.g. Num 16:3,33; 1Ki 2:6,9; Ps 9:17, etc.). But there are some texts that indicate that Sheol is the place of the righteous dead (Gen 37:35; Ps 88:3; 89:48; Isa 38:10).

This is why in the NT we find the soul of Jesus in Hades although only for a while. Acts 2:27 says, *For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One see corruption.*

But in Luke 16:23 Hades is also referred to as a place of torment. In Luke 16:23 it says that when the rich man died, *"In Hades he lifted up his eyes being in torment."*

And so it seems that the meaning of Hades depends on the context. In some instances, it refers simply to the grave where all who die go to, whether they are good or bad. But in some contexts, it could refer to the place where only the wicked go when they die.

The statement *"death and hades gave up the dead"* could simply mean that the physical bodies of all those who have died will be joined with their spirits and be resurrected.

Perhaps what John is doing here when he writes, *"And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them,"* he is using a language that is intended to cover all of the places that hold the dead, both body and spirit, whether it is in the sea, the grave or Hades. From all of these places where the dead are found or from this condition of death, God will summon all to face Him at the Great White Throne.

So who will be included among those who are summoned from the dead and raised to life to face the Great White Throne Judgment? They will include the following:

- (1) All of those who are spoken of in Rev 20:5, *"The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed."* These will include **all of the unrighteous who have died since the time of Adam until the return of Christ** when He destroys all of His enemies at the battle of Armageddon.
- (2) The dead who will face the Great White Throne will also include all **unbelievers who will die during the millennium**. Not all mortals who enter the millennium will receive the Lord. According to Rev 20:8, at the end of the millennium, many of them will actually be deceived by Satan attack the camp of the saints. All of the unbelievers who will die a natural death during the millennium or who will be destroyed by the Lord at the end of the millennium will be resurrected and face the Great White Throne judgment.

- (3) The dead who will face the Great White Throne will also include all of the **believers who will die during the millennium**. As I said, the mortals who will enter the millennium will multiply and I believe that many of them will trust in Jesus and be saved. Because they do not yet have resurrected bodies and because they are not yet perfect, they too will die. They will be raised by the Lord and they will face God at the Great White Throne to have their works evaluated and rewarded.
- (4) I believe another group of people who will face the Great White Throne will be **all the mortals who are saved and yet remain alive at the end of the millennium**. They belong to the camp of God and they will be protected by God from the attack of Satan's forces. They have reached the end of the millennium and so they will no longer die but I believe that their bodies are going to be glorified by God. They too will face the Great White Throne Judgment to have their works evaluated and rewarded.
- (5) Now let us not forget, that another group of people who will face the Great White Throne are **all the glorified saints in the millennium**. Who are the glorified saints who will be in the millennium? They will include those who were transported to heaven without dying like Enoch and Elijah. They will include all of the saints who were raised to life during Christ's resurrection (Mt 27:52-53), all who will be part of the rapture during Christ's second coming (1Th 4:14-17), and all the martyrs who will be resurrected at the beginning of the millennium. All of these glorified saints who will enter the millennium will also face the Great White Throne. They will not face God in order to be condemned, but rather to have their works evaluated and rewarded according to 1Co 3:11-15.

STANDARD

How are they going to be judged? Let us now look at the **STANDARD**. What is the standard by which they are judged? Today we are just going to look at how the sinners and unbelievers are going to be judged. And we see it in verses 12, 13, and 15.

- *Sinners will be judged by what is written in the books.* There are the "books" that contain records of everything that all human beings have ever said, done, or even thought, whether they are good or evil, and God will reward or punish each one based on those records.
- *Sinners will be judged by what is written in the book of life.* This book will determine whether a person will inherit eternal life with God or receive everlasting punishment in the lake of fire.

1. Sinners will be judged by what is written in the books, according to what they had done. Vv. 12-13:

12 ... and books were opened. ... And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. 13 .. and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done.

That is to say that God is going to judge based on the absolute and perfect record of everything that every person has ever done. It's all in the books. God has kept perfect, complete, flawless, comprehensive records of every person's thought and every person's word and every person's action throughout their entire life. (MacArthur)

Verse 12 says, "*And books were opened.*" The prophet Daniel saw the very same thing that John saw. He saw this time of judgment. He saw the throne and the Ancient of Days taking His seat. He saw innumerable angels around the throne of God. And in Daniel 7:10," he says, "*and the books were opened.*" The very same statement that John makes.

What are those books? These contain the records of every thought and every word and every deed of every sinner. Because unbelievers have not put their trust in Christ, and their sins are not covered by His blood and they are not forgiven, and so every sin that they have committed will be remembered. Every sin they have done will be found in the heavenly books.

They are going to be judged on the basis of their works using God's perfect standard. And what is God's standard?

- *Mt 5:48, "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."*
- *1Pe 1:15,16, "but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, 16 since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."*
- *Gal 3:10, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them."*
- *Jas 2:10-11 whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. 11 For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law."*

If you have ever broken one law of God, even once, you are cursed and you are damned for violating the perfect standard. That is why Romans 3:23 says, "For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God."

None will be able to claim "I did not know," because every man entering the world receives sufficient revelation to seek God. Those who did not seek Him will stand condemned by general revelation.

Ps 19:1-4 Amplified 2015

1 The heavens are telling of the glory of God; And the expanse [of heaven] is declaring the work of His hands. 2 Day after day pours forth speech, And night after night reveals knowledge. 3 There is no speech, nor are there [spoken] words [from the stars]; Their voice is not heard. 4 Yet their voice [in quiet evidence] has gone out through all the earth, Their words to the end of the world.

Although the revelation of God in nature is insufficient to save, it is sufficient to condemn those who fail to respond:

Romans 1:20-22 For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. 21 For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Claiming to be wise, they became fools, 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Along with His revelation in nature, God provided another form of general revelation: the law written upon men's hearts.

Romans 2:14-16 For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. 15 They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them 16 on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

Those who never came to faith have not passively rejected God. Paul tells us it was an active rebellion:

Romans 1:18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

Romans 1 and 2 show that there are no real atheists. God has revealed Himself in nature and in our conscience so that all are without excuse. Even those who have never heard the name of Jesus or seen a Bible have enough evidence of God's existence to seek Him. The reason they do not believe God exists is not because there is no proof of His existence. Instead it is because they suppress the truth.

When we speak to people who reject the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ and ask them by what means they hope to enter heaven, they almost universally reply with the notion that they are basically good and that by their deeds they will find entry. They are convinced: (1) that their good deeds will outweigh the bad, (2) so long as they are better than others then they are acceptable to God.

The truth is, from God's perspective their bad deeds universally outweigh the good. Moreover, God does not grade us in relation to others but in relation to the perfection of God Himself.

Now if the unbelievers have perfectly obeyed God they are going to be all right. But the problem is that no one meets God's standard.

They will be judged on their **thoughts**. *Luke 8:17, "For nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light."*

In Romans 2:16 Paul describes the Day of Judgment as *"that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus."*

It will not only be a judgment of thoughts to see if people are perfect, but it will be a judgment of **words**. Matthew 12:37, *"for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."*

It will also be a judgment of **deeds**. Matthew 16:27, *"For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done."*

The record for each person will be unique and so will the punishment. The Bible teaches that there are degrees of punishment based upon degrees of sinfulness and upon the light and response to the light that one has received:

- *Lk 12:47-48 And that servant who knew his master's will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating. 48 But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating. Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more.*

Those who knew more and failed to respond will bear greater guilt than those who knew less.

- *Mt 10:14-15 And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town. 15 Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town.*

In other words, those who died when God buried Sodom and Gomorrah under fire and brimstone, are raised, and the people of some town or some village that rejected the preaching of the Apostles are raised and they stand there side by side before the Great White Throne judgment—the punishment that comes to Sodom and Gomorrah will be more tolerable than the punishment that comes to those who rejected the preaching of the Apostles.

Our Lord says the same thing in Matthew 11:20-24.

- *Mt 11:20-24 Then he began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent. 21 "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. 22 But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. 23 And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. 24 But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you."*

There are degrees of toleration in punishment.

- *John 19:11 Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin."*

- *Mk 12:38-40 And in his teaching he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces 39 and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, 40 who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."*

MacArthur says,

If a person is not saved, the sooner he dies the better because the longer he lives and the longer the list of his sins in the books becomes and the more he hears and rejects, the greater the punishment. ... [Paul says in] Romans 2:5, *"But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed."*

Every day the sinner lives, every evil thought he has, every unholy pleasure he enjoys, every ungrateful breath he breathes, every selfish act, every gospel word rejected, every divine truth spurned adds to his eternal punishment.

Even time spent trying to earn salvation while rejecting grace only adds to the ultimate punishment. The unsaved religious in Christianity will suffer the hottest hell because they have trampled on Christ and by means of self-righteousness attempted to attain salvation. They know the most therefore they suffer the greatest. [*Heb 10:28-29 Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. 29 How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?*]

All sinners in hell will be completely miserable but not equally miserable. The punishment fits the crime. And each crime brings the eternal judgment according to the nature of that crime. That's why the books were opened. The judgment fits the record and God is absolutely and exactly and precisely just.

And so, the first standard by which sinners are judged is by what is written in the "books." The next is this:

2. Sinners will be judged by what is written in the "book of life."

Verse 12 says, *"Then another book was opened, which is the book of life."* This book will determine whether a person will inherit eternal life with God or receive everlasting punishment in the lake of fire.

This book has been referred to even in the OT. In Daniel 12:1, *"And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found **written in the book.**"*

In that book are the names of His own, the names of those who believed in God, who trusted in His grace alone, who were loyal to Him, who were faithful to Him.

In Philippians 4:3, Paul talks about his fellow workers whose names are in the book of life.

3 Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Perhaps this is what our Lord Jesus referred to when He said to His disciples in Luke 10:20,

"Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

The book of life is mentioned in Revelation several times.

- Rev 3:5, "book of life"
- Rev 13:18, "book of life of the Lamb"
- Rev 17:8, "book of life"
- Rev 21:27, "the Lamb's book of life"

This book contains the names of those who will not die the second death. It is the listing of those who belong to God and receive eternal life.

God wrote those names before the foundation of the world. *Revelation 17:8 And the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will marvel to see the beast, because it was and is not and is to come.*

It is a list of the elect and the list of the redeemed of all the ages because of the atoning work of Christ.

Now turn to Rev 20:15 and see what it says about those whose names are not found there. *"And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."*

Some who will stand before the throne of God perhaps are going to ask, "Is my name there? Am I among the listed, loyal, submissive subjects of the King of Kings? Am I numbered among the holy children of God who wear the robes of heavenly righteousness?" They might think, "I'm a good person, I think when I get there God will let me into His heaven because I've done enough good things for Him and for my neighbors."

Oh what a tragic deception that is. Those who have not trusted in the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, will be sadly disappointed to find how they have been deceived. Their self-righteousness is no righteousness after all. (MacArthur)

Romans 10:1-4 Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. 2 For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. 3 For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. 4 For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

The only hope for sinners to have their record of sin to be erased is to have their names written in the Lamb's book of life. The only hope to escape being thrown into the lake of fire is to come to God in humble repentance, acknowledging your guilt, crying out to a merciful God to forgive you for Jesus' sake.

When we put our faith in Christ, the list of sins against us is cancelled. Paul says in Colossians 2:13-14:

13 And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, 14 by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

Either you come now, recognizing your sin, that you are cursed, you have fallen short, you are not perfect, you are not as holy as God, as perfect as the Father in heaven, you have violated the law and you plead for forgiveness and mercy and you receive the gift of grace now and you will find your name written in the Lamb's book of life—or you go to receive your sentence before the Great White Throne and are eternally damned to hell.

Please don't try to be philosophical by asking, how could I trust in Christ if my name has not been written in the Lamb's book of life? Why does the Bible say that the names in the Book of Life have already been written there even before the foundation of the world and then I say that those who put their trust in Christ will receive eternal life (meaning, their names are written in the Book of Life). So how do our names get written in the book of Life? Is it because God first wrote it there even before creation or is it because we trusted in Christ? Honestly this is not an easy question to answer. But what I can say is this: Life is so uncertain and the stakes are too high for you postpone your repentance and faith in Christ simply because you could not reconcile God's sovereignty with human responsibility. I suggest that you leave God's sovereignty to *the secret things that belong to God* (Dt 29:29), and do what God has revealed. Do what you can do. God has clearly revealed in His Word that Jesus invites all sinners to repent and to come to Him for forgiveness and eternal life. Do that. Receive Him now.

John 3:16-18 "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

If you continue to postpone your decision or reject this call from Christ and therefore you go to hell as a consequence, you cannot blame God. You can only blame yourself.

So, there we have the the **scene** and the **summons** and the **standard** by which sinners are measured. Next time, the Lord willing, we are going to look at what the Great White Judgment means for believers. And then we'll look at the last point in this passage, the **sentence**.

Prayer

- 1) That the Holy Spirit will help us to examine our own lives.
- 2) That unbelievers who hear this message will not remain indifferent but realize that they are dealing with their eternal destiny and God may take their lives any time. May they repent of their sin and put their trust in Jesus Christ to save them now.
- 3) That nominal Christians will be delivered from false assurance. On the day of Judgment many will say to Christ, "Lord, Lord," but Christ will rebuke them and say, "Why do you call me Lord when you never submitted your life to me and obeyed my words. I never knew you; depart from Me, you workers of lawlessness."
- 4) That Christians who know that this message is true but unconcerned for the lost will be forgiven and be awakened to care enough for them to reach out to them with the precious gospel of Christ.
- 5) That believers will really be grateful that the Lord has rescued them, not because they are worthy or because they have done anything to deserve salvation, but only because of His mercy and grace.
- 6) That the believer's gratitude will be manifested a life of worship and holy living.