

All Things New: The Judgment
By Jason Huff
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Ecclesiastes 12:13-14; John 5:19-30; Revelation 20:7-15

Our final Scripture reading today is from Revelation 20:7-15. May God bless the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. “When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth -- Gog and Magog -- to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore. They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever. Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”

The last time I was in any sort of courtroom – and perhaps the only time, to my memory – was in colonial Williamsburg. We got a tour of where justice was served in Virginia's capital from 1699 to 1780. We saw the stocks where people were placed for most first offenses, where others would jeer them and sometimes throw rotten fruit and vegetables at them. But we also learned how justice was much stricter than we imagine it today – someone who was convicted of stealing a pig three times was considered incorrigible and faced execution. A lot of times, while the penalty was death, the actual punishment was banishment. Still, pretty harsh.

I know a fair number of you are tuning in on the Internet or are with us for the first time in person and you might be wondering, “What have I gotten myself into?” Today's passage is intense, and it's one that has caused a lot of fire and brimstone preaching over the centuries. I want to ask you to trust God and to trust me for a few minutes this morning. As a church, we've been going through the book of Revelation since September of last year, so I didn't suddenly pick this passage out of nowhere. I honestly believe this is what God wants us to hear this morning.

Today's passage reminds us how much we want to stay out of the courthouse, out of the eye of the judge, out of the way of judgment. But we also want to remember that when the court rules in our favor, it can be a huge blessing. Today's message is about judgment, but judgment that includes not just punishment but rewards – judgment where all is set right.

Last week, we talked a little bit about the rule of Christ during the millennium and the resurrection of the saints to spiritual life in God's presence in heaven. We determined that in all likelihood, this is the period from Christ's resurrection until now – a time when God's church continues to expand and grow despite persecution and evil still existing in the world. The saints are alive in heaven in spirit, both serving God and reigning alongside Him. The devil has had to give his power over to secondary agents of evil because he is bound and cannot directly attack God's people.

Because Revelation is not terribly clear about its timeline, it might be that Satan's doom might be the same time as the end of the beast and the false prophet and the harlot. It appears that God's enemies are all taken down around the same time. But what we know is that Satan is allowed a brief time when he is allowed to face down God's church. He will deceive the nations into war against God and God's people.

And make no mistake – this is an enormous attack. The armies are beyond count. Gog and Magog are a reference found in the prophet Ezekiel – Gog was the king over a place called Magog, and it appears that he had pulled together forces from all over, from Persia to Egypt, to attack Israel. Legends about Gog and Magog became popular in Jewish and Roman literature alike. While he's not referenced again, he's a prototype of a leader pulling together all the nations to come against God's people. And that's what's promised here – the whole earth is enveloped by people declaring themselves the enemy of God, and they encircle the camp. It's a picture of the faithful being persecuted as never before, under perhaps the most fierce attack the world has ever known.

But in an instant, they are destroyed. The forces that oppose Christ's beloved are consumed in a moment. As He has promised, as we have seen in every battle described in Revelation, evil and unrighteousness are wiped out utterly. When God's judgment comes, it is swift and powerful and devastating to those who have sided against him.

Finally, we see the final judgment of the dragon, the devil, who winds up thrown in the lake of burning sulfur as were the beast and false prophet. He finally receives his due. And what is interesting to me is this: the Scripture says, "They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever." We have been told in our art and literature and entertainment of eternal judgment where the demonic are the tormentors of the wicked. But that's not what Scripture describes. No, the ones responsible for leading humanity into sin and wickedness and evil are themselves under punishment forever.

We are not in a battle of good versus evil where evil still gets to rule its own little world into eternity. It has been God's holy angels who have been assigned throughout the book of Revelation to pour out the wrath of God on sin. I don't believe God would put a wicked creature in charge of anything, certainly not His perfect judgment. Instead, it is Jesus in His perfect wisdom who judges and assigns punishment, punishment that will be administered in perfection and will fit whatever has been done on earth.

That judgment is what we come to next. “Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it.” Jesus is not directly named, and yet we know it is Jesus. Paul teaches in 2 Timothy 4 and Romans 5 that Jesus will judge the living and the dead. The Father puts the Son in charge of judgment, I believe, because Jesus, though he was with the Father before the beginning of the world, became human and lived among us. No one can accuse Jesus of not being the perfect judge because He experienced all that besets humanity and was still without sin.

The passage then says, “Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them.” Now the word in Greek for “sky” also means “heaven.” This is the passing away of the earth and heaven as we know them – they will no longer exist. When Jesus returns to claim His own, everything as it currently is will cease. We’ll see more about how they are replaced in next week’s passage. But this is truly an end to the visible world.

John then sees all the dead – every person, no matter who they were, before the throne. John mentions both the great and the small. No one bypasses the great judgment of God – not even Christians. Everyone faces Christ as judge. And every single place gives up the dead to this, the second resurrection – the resurrection. The sea and death and Hades – which is not hell as we might as we think of it, but the realm of the dead, called Sheol in ancient Hebrew – the dead in every kind of place, every kind of person, are returned to life for the judgment. The good, the bad, the believer, the unbeliever, all those who died at any place at any time, buried in any way, all come face to face with Jesus.

There are at least two books involved for everyone: the book of records and the book of life. Everything we do is recorded in the first book. But the second book is the more important of the two. Everyone whose name is not recorded in the book of life is thrown in the lake of fire. This is the punishment for Satan and the fallen angels, the beast – everyone that has rebelled against God and His ways.

The book of life is mentioned as early as the book of Exodus and found in the Psalms, as well as in the prophets Ezekiel, Daniel, Isaiah, and Malachi. Jesus alludes to it in Luke 10; Paul mentions it in Philippians 4. It is not a book you earn your way into. Your name isn’t written in the book of life based on what you’ve done. In fact, we have already heard in Revelation 13:8 and 17:8 that names were written in the Book of Life before the foundations of the earth. Before anyone committed a single sin or did a single righteous act, God had completed the Book of Life.

Paul describes exactly what happened in a song of worship found in Ephesians 1:3-8 – “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will-- to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.”

Here's the deal: God, in His infinite and perfect wisdom, chose Himself a people and has called them holy, sacred and beloved in His sight. He sent His Son to die for them so that they could be declared righteous by His sacrifice, and He sent His Holy Spirit to them to change them from the inside out, to become the righteous people He declared them to be. That's been God's plan all along. Since we could not conquer the mess we were in, since God knew we would all be spiritually dead and unable to meet His perfect standard, God planned from before a single human being stood on this planet to save those He loved.

We do not wind up in the Book of Life because we have done good works written in the Book of Records. We believe in Jesus as Savior and Lord and become His disciple and do good works written in the Book of Records because our names were written by God in the Book of Life. If you come to faith, if you follow Christ, it is very much you doing those things. And yet in the mystery of God, He has made it all happen. He is the One to receive all the glory, honor, and praise for saving you.

And save you He does. Once death and Hades give up their dead, they are thrown in the lake of fire. Now Revelation is a book full of symbols and metaphors. What is cast out, what is set ablaze, is not necessarily a literal place. What is eternally destroyed are these awful things that cause such suffering and grief, such pain and anguish. Death haunts us all our days. Hades, the grave, Sheol, no matter what words you use, it exists because of the consequences of sin. And without sin, there is no more death. Without sin, there is no need for the grave. They are set ablaze never to trouble the saints again. What a joy it is to know that not only the devil but suffering and death and the grave are all defeated.

But here's the tough part, the thing God really saves us from – “If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.” Again, not because of deeds found in the Book of Records, but what is found in the Book of Life. We might think, well, that doesn't seem very fair or very loving of God.

But remember what we've been taught from Isaiah 64:6 – “All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.” Or Paul in Romans 3:23 – “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” Or Psalm 14:3 – “All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.” No one has the righteousness on their own to be acceptable in God's sight. Every last one of us at some point has gone our own way and rebelled against God. Every last person has committed treason against God, and thus is deserving of wrath.

But those who come to trust in God for salvation, who trust in His promises and trust in His Son, receive God's forgiveness, are clothed with Jesus' righteousness, and are saved from the fire. We might say, “Why is there only one way to salvation?” But as R.C. Sproul put it, “Why should there be even one way?” God, whom we have constantly rebelled against, owes us nothing. But He saves us out of His incredible mercy and grace and love. He loved us so much that He gave His Son for us that we might be able to enter His Kingdom, pure and spotless before Him. It isn't fair that Jesus had to die a terrible death on a cross to redeem us – that's what's unfair, that an innocent man would die for the guilty. But Jesus did not see it as too high a price to redeem His people.

But here's the really good news, the part we might miss if we get too obsessed with that: the judgment to come is not just one of punishment, but one of reward. David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, they all wrote about it. Jesus taught in the Beatitudes about the great reward in heaven for those who are persecuted for Him. Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talks to His followers about the kinds of attitudes and actions that would receive eternal rewards. And in His parables, Jesus spoke about how those who were faithful with a few things would be given charge over much, and would share in God's joy!

Hebrews 11:6 tells us that God rewards those who earnestly seek Him. 1 Corinthians 3:8 tells us that each person who labors for the Lord will receive rewards according to what he or she has done. 2 John 1:8 warns us to watch ourselves so that we don't lose any of our reward but may be rewarded fully. Even earlier in Revelation 11, we are told that the time is coming for the rewards to be given to the prophets and saints and those who revere God's name.

Do we know what every reward will be? No. Scripture isn't very interested in spelling those out. But the greatest reward of all will be being with God. The final two chapters of Revelation still to come will tell us more of what we can expect. It will take us a few weeks to get through them, but you won't want to miss it. While it barely scratches the surface, the beauty of what is in store for those who love God and follow Him is amazing.

Here, then, is the question we need to be asking ourselves: *since judgment is coming, how should I live?* We've already determined that your deeds do not get you into the Book of Life. Nothing you can do can earn you a place in heaven. So our lives shouldn't be about being good enough, about balancing the scales, because that isn't how it works. Rebellion against God, no matter what it is, any sin, cannot be outweighed. That debt can only be erased one way.

The erasing of your sin from the record comes only through trusting in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord and becoming His disciple. Not believing Jesus existed or being a fan of Jesus, not even praying a once-and-done "I'm sorry" prayer. We are saved through faith alone, not through works – but that faith shows itself through discipleship, through learning what Jesus taught and living it out. What Christ did in His sacrifice on the cross was to erase the sins of every believer, canceling the debt that stood against us. When the truth of what He did for you sinks in and you truly believe, you want to follow, you want to learn more, you want to act in ways that honor and glorify God, because you become enamored with the wonderful Savior who gave Himself for your sake. And in living that way, you live in a manner worthy of reward.

A life of a disciple is not easy from an earthly perspective, but we do not do it on our own. When we believe, the Holy Spirit comes to us and begins our transformation into people who start to look like what God has declared us to be – His children. It doesn't happen through our own power or our good works, but through the power that the Father gives to those who trust in Jesus the Son.

Friends, next week we will hear all about the wonders of God's Kingdom to come. But let's not rush there. Let's contemplate this week: am I a disciple of Jesus living in a way that shows my name is written in the Book of Life? Am I living in a way that reflects my Lord and will be worthy of reward in the life to come? May it be so for all of us.