

“The Books Were Opened”

Sermons on the Book of Revelation # 29

Texts: Revelation 20:11-15; Daniel 7:9-14

No subject strikes terror into the human heart like the thought of standing before God on judgment day, knowing that we must each give a full account of all those things we have done. But this is exactly what we find in the latter part of Revelation chapter 20, when John describes a very sobering scene before the throne in heaven. The books will be opened and the dead will be judged according to what they have done, whether that be good or evil.

We complete our discussion of Revelation chapter 20, as we move into the final section of this book dealing with the eternal state. The eternal state is that period of redemptive history which comes after human history as we know it, is no more. To put it in basic terms, in the balance of Revelation, John is describing what we commonly speak of as “heaven.” But before we enter the eternal state, John reminds us that there is a final judgment yet to come. The very thought of facing God on judgment day gives us reason to pause.

Last time, we read the last 5 verses of Revelation 20 in connection with our discussion of the millennial age. We did so to make the point that the second coming of Jesus Christ and the final judgment occur *after* the millennial reign of Christ, demonstrating that the Bible does not teach premillennialism. But these few verses also serve as a very climatic and final turning point in redemptive history. Therefore, they deserve our full attention, especially when we look back at the ground we have covered in the Book of Revelation so far. In a sweeping survey of the messianic age, John has taken us from the first century to the time of the end and beyond, describing the course of redemptive history between the two comings of Christ from a number different camera angles, so to speak, using apocalyptic symbolism drawn from the Old Testament and set against the backdrop of the first century Roman empire.

In order to fully appreciate the importance these verses play in redemptive history, we need to briefly survey that which has gone before. In the first three chapters of Revelation, we covered John’s vision of the resurrected Christ walking among his churches, as well as the seven letters to the churches of Asia Minor, in which John was speaking to those issues facing Christians in his original audience. As we have seen, these are issues which Christians will face throughout this present evil age. John has told us something of the persecution Christians were facing at the hands of Roman empire. We have also read of false teachers slipping into these churches, dividing them through false doctrine and deceptively leading people away from Christ. In speaking directly to the seven historic churches about the nature of Satan’s assaults, John is warning Christians throughout this present age of those things they can expect from their great enemy, the Devil, a defeated foe who rages against us because his doom is sure.

In Revelation 4-8, John is taken up to heaven, where he glimpses the throne in heaven. He describes the worthiness of the Lamb to open the seven seals of the mysterious scroll, an act which begins the first of three cycles of judgment against the earth, bringing death and destruction to one fourth of the earth’s inhabitants. Like birth pains, the seal judgments become more violent and intense toward the end of the age, before the sixth seal is opened which depicts a great earthquake and the second coming of Jesus Christ. Then with the seventh seal there is only silence. Then in Revelation 8-11, John describes a second cycle of judgment, the so-called trumpet judgments. Like the seals, the trumpet judgments are cyclical in nature and intensify before the time of the end. But the trumpets judgments are more intense

than the seals, bringing judgment upon one third of the earth's inhabitants, ending with the seventh and final trumpet, announcing the second coming of Jesus Christ and the destruction of the city of man.

In Revelation 11-14, using apocalyptic symbols, John sets forth the roles of several of the principle players in the redemptive drama, including the woman (Israel) the dragon (Satan) the first beast from the sea (Roman empire), the second beast from the earth (the false prophet), the 144,000 (the church upon the earth) the two witnesses who preach the gospel, the three angelic heralds who announce the coming of final judgment, before pointing us to the victorious Lamb of God who dwells among his people in the heavenly Zion. Like all the previous visions, this section takes us from the coming of Christ right up to the final judgment, while not actually describing the final judgment of the earth's inhabitants.

Next, in Revelation 15-16, John describes the third and final cycle of judgment, the so-called bowl judgments, when God's fury is poured out upon the earth. Far and away the most intense cycle of judgment, the bowl judgments extend to whole earth and to all of its inhabitants and are primarily focused upon the time of end. Indeed, John points out that once these seven bowls of wrath have been poured out upon the earth, God's wrath is complete (in the sense of being finished). Once again, John brings us right up to the moment of final judgment without describing the final judgment itself.

Then, in Revelation 17-18, John uses the city of Rome and the Roman empire as graphic illustrations of a future world-wide anti-Christian empire which will arise at the time of the end. John describes the seductive ways of the great city using the imagery of a harlot who seduces the kings of the earth, involving them in her gross idolatries. But John also describes her final destruction. According to the testimony of the angel, God himself puts it in the hearts of those the great harlot has seduced to turn upon her and bring her to ruin. John watches as the kings of the earth weep and mourn as Babylon the Great is consumed in the flames, the smoke of her destruction serving as the frightening reminder of what is about to befall all those who participated in her idolatries.

In the first half of Revelation 19, John describes the return of Jesus Christ to destroy all the nations of the earth, as well as those, great and small, who done the bidding of the beast and worshiped his image. There is rejoicing in heaven at the news that the time of the end has come. Not only has God vindicated his suffering saints, but the news of the destruction of Babylon means the time has come for the marriage supper of Christ the Lamb, when the church is now a radiant spotless bride, prepared for her husband. In the last half of Revelation 19, John describes yet another feast, this time when God brings the birds of prey to feast upon the flesh of the those who are destroyed by Christ during the last great battle when the kings of the earth begin their final assault upon the church. The beast and the False prophet are caught alive, John says, and thrown into the lake of fire.

All this brings us to our text last week, Revelation 20:1-6, the famous millennial passage in which John describes the reign of Christ in heaven for a thousand years along with the saints who come out of the great tribulation. In this vision, which likewise covers the entire period of time between Christ's first coming and second advent—the thousand years not being a literal one thousand years, but an apocalyptic symbol for an ideal period of time—John sees an angel coming down from heaven, confining Satan to the abode of the dead so that he can no longer deceive the nations. John goes on to speak of the first resurrection, which is when a believer crosses over from death to life at the moment of regeneration, so that upon their death they “come to life” and reign with Christ in heaven for a thousand years. Then in verses 7-10 of Revelation 20, John then witnesses a brief time of great apostasy at the end of the age, when Satan is let loose from his abyss when the thousand years are over. The Devil now goes out to the four corners of earth to orchestrate one final revolt against Jesus Christ and his church (the camp of

God's people, the city that he loves), which culminates in the final battle when Satan himself is at long last thrown into the lake of fire where he will be tormented forever and ever.

Why this quick survey of what has gone before? Because in each of these visions, John has brought us right up to the very threshold of the final judgment, but has never described the judgment itself. We have seen Christ's glorious victory over all his enemies, including the Devil, the beast, the false prophet, the harlot, the kings of the earth who sided with them, and all those who have taken the mark of the beast and who have worshiped his image. All of these images describe what is, as well as what is to come, but in rather general terms.

But when we come to the last five verses of Revelation 20, we are no longer speaking in generalities. Things now get intensely personal. No one can know exactly what the future holds for us. Neither can we know what our own role will be in the great pageant of redemption John has just set forth. But we do know that the scene in Revelation 20:11-15 is one in which we will all participate. Each one of us will stand before the God's throne and give an account of what we have done. No longer is John's apocalyptic vision dealing with generalities of what will come to pass. Here, we are told in no uncertain terms precisely what lies ahead for each one of us. Whatever the future holds and whatever our role in it may be, one thing is clear, we will all stand before God in the judgment.

The church's reflection upon these verses have had a tremendous influence upon the course of western civilization. Many of you know that the fear of the final judgment so tormented Martin Luther that he took up the study of theology, looking for a way to bring relief to his troubled conscience. Luther could not erase from his mind images he had seen in his youth of the final judgment with men and women being dragged off kicking and screaming into hell by demons, after being denied entrance into heaven because of insufficient good works or because of a particularly heinous sin. Indeed, it was part and parcel of medieval Christian piety to portray the final judgment depicted by John in graphic detail in painting and woodcuts. This preoccupation with hell and judgment had its roots, in part, in Dante's famous book, *The Divine Comedy*, written in the 13th century and which to this day still impacts much of our understanding of judgment and eternal punishment. What most people think of when they think of hell and the final judgment actually comes from Dante, not from the Scriptures.

There are many of us who have grown up in the church who can readily identify with Luther's fears of the final judgment. I recall hearing my dear and pious grandmother speaking of the final judgment being like a movie, in which God would replay my every sinful thought, reveal my every secret sin and expose the depths of my depravity. Blessedly, she accompanied this alarming description of the supreme humiliation and embarrassment of having my secret sins made public, by reminding me that Christ died for all of my sins and that I had nothing to fear. I still think of the final judgment in these terms. Images like this are hard to shake.

Realizing that this is a very uncomfortable subject and that many of us probably have misconceptions about what the final judgment actually entails, let us turn to our text, Revelation 20:11-15.

In verse 11, John sees the pivotal event which brings all of human history to its final conclusion. Says John, "*then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it.*" Recall that throughout the Book of Revelation, John never describes God's appearance, only that which surrounds him. The white throne symbolizes the purity and righteous character of the one who is seated upon it, whose ways are altogether just and right, and whose cause is now totally vindicated. The white throne is also a symbol of victory.

All of God's enemies have now been defeated. Jesus Christ is the victor. All of God's enemies must now give an account for their rebellious ways.¹ But this vision also conveys the idea that the heavenly court has assembled to hear the final verdict for each man and woman, and the event which will bring all things to their appointed ends and usher in the eternal state.

The heavenly scene in Revelation 20:11 resounds with a number of loud echoes drawn directly from Daniel 7:9-14, our Old Testament lesson. Like John, Daniel attempts to describe what he sees: "*As I looked, thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool.*" Like the vision in Revelation, this scene from Daniel's prophecy is not intended to tell us what God looks like—that he's a man wearing a white robe with white hair—but rather to illustrate the majesty and divine authority of the one seated on the throne. Like John, Daniel uses highly symbolic language to describe what he sees. "*His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze. A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him.*" The heavenly court is filled with the hosts of heaven, now watching as the final verdicts are to be pronounced. "*Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court was seated, and the books were opened.*" Like John, Daniel, too, sees the final judgment.

But not only does John see the heavenly throne, John also witnesses the cosmic upheaval and the shaking of entire universe associated with the final judgment. Says John, "*earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them.*" Recall that earlier in Revelation 6:12-17, when the sixth seal was opened, John reports how "*I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. . . . For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?*" Obviously, no one can stand!

Likewise, in Revelation 16:17-21 John told that when the "*seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air . . . out of the temple came a loud voice from the throne, saying, 'It is done!' Then there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder and a severe earthquake. No earthquake like it has ever occurred since man has been on earth, so tremendous was the quake Every island fled away and the mountains could not be found. From the sky huge hailstones of about a hundred pounds each fell upon men. And they cursed God on account of the plague of hail, because the plague was so terrible.*" Therefore, this scene in Revelation 20:11, is a retelling of that we have already seen in Revelation 6 and 13—the shaking of the universe—this time from the vantage point of final judgment.

The same imagery appears in 2 Peter 3, where Peter also describes the Day of the Lord in terms of a recreation of the universe. "*But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.*" The day of judgment is also the day when the entire universe is renewed, and when every hint and trace of human sin is purged from all creation. The fact that heaven and earth (called the first heaven and earth in Revelation 21) flee from the presence of God, opens the way for the creation of a new heavens and earth

¹ Johnson, The Triumph of the Lamb, 297.

and is described more fully in Revelation 21.

Returning now to Revelation 20, John not only sees the renewal of the cosmos, like Daniel, he too witnesses the heavenly court convene so that the final sentence can be pronounced upon all individuals. In Revelation 20:12, we read *“I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne and books were opened.”* These books contain the records of everything we have done, because as we read in the next verse, *“the dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books.”* This idea of a final judgment according to our works should come as no surprise. At the dawn of time, God instituted a covenant of works with Adam in the Garden of Eden in which he promised Adam eternal life upon the condition of perfect obedience. That covenant still remains in force, even after the fall. It has never been abrogated. In fact, we will be judged according to terms of this original covenant of works—that is according to what we have done.

Recall that when God makes a covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai and the general terms of the covenant of works are republished with much greater clarity on tablets of stone, the same basic principle is reiterated. God will bless those who obey to his law. He will punish all those who disobey to his commandments. This is why the Scriptures make the point throughout that all people will be judged according to their works. In Psalm 62:13, we read: *“O Lord, are loving. Surely you will reward each person according to what he has done.”* In Romans 2:6, Paul says the exact same thing: *“God will give to each person according to what he has done.”* In 2 Corinthians 5:10, Paul describes the same event John describes here in only slightly different terms. *“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.”*

Therefore, the books which are opened on the day of judgment, do indeed contain the records of all things we have done, good or evil. And if we are judged according to our deeds, what is the only possible outcome? Who among us is without sin and has obeyed God’s law perfectly as he demands?

The good news is that this is not the only sets of books to be opened. In verse 12, John informs us that *“another book was opened.”* This book does not contain the record of our deeds, but is instead described as *“the book of life.”* This book contains names of specific individuals, not a record of their deeds.² This is the book mentioned back in Revelation 13:8 when John mentions that those who worship the beast are those *“whose names have not been written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world.”* We find the same language in Revelation 17:8, where John speaks of those who follow the beast as those *“whose names have not been written in the book of life from the creation of the world.”* The Book of Life contains a list of the names of God’s elect. These are the people for whom Christ has died and for whom he has perfectly obeyed the covenant of works and the Ten Commandments. While all men and women will give an account of their works, those whose names are written in the book of life escape eternal punishment having been purchased by the blood of the Lamb.

In chapter 12 of Daniel’s prophecy, Daniel also describes the final judgment in terms of the opening of the book of life, connecting the opening of the book to the general resurrection at the end of time. *“At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in*

² Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 299.

the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever. But you, Daniel, close up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end. Many will go here and there to increase knowledge.”

The scroll which was closed until the time of end, has now been opened in the Book of Revelation and is now revealed to John. In Revelation 20, John, like Daniel, also connects the day of judgment to the day of resurrection. In verse 13, John tells us that *“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.”* Recall that throughout the Book of Revelation, these are the three names used for the region of the dead. At the time of the end, all of those held in these places are now raised from the dead and stand before the presence of God to give an account of all that they have done.³ The focus here is clearly upon unbelievers, since those who have died in Christ are not confined to the sea, death, or Hades, but have been depicted throughout the Book of Revelation as already being in the presence of Christ in heaven, awaiting this great day of resurrection and the creation of a new heaven and earth.

Emptied of the dead they contained, we read in verse 14, *“then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire.”* In other words, the temporary places where the dead have been kept—the sea, death and Hades—give way to the permanent abode of the unbelieving dead, the lake of fire, which John now tells us is *“the second death.”* Furthermore, John goes on to say in verse 15, *“If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”* It should be perfectly clear that all those whose names are not written in the book of life and have been judged according to their deeds, failed to stand in that judgment, and are, therefore, cast into the lake of fire, which is an apocalyptic symbol for unending, conscious torment in the presence of God.⁴ This is not a literal lake of fire, but something much worse. John is describing the presence of God (who is a consuming fire) in his wrath for all eternity. This is what we mean when we speak of hell, and words cannot describe it. This is the fate of all those who are not Christ’s, who reject the gospel, and whose names are not written in the book of life.

But if you are trusting in Jesus Christ this is not a day you should fear! Indeed, all those in Christ escape this horrible fate, because their names have been written in the book of life before the creation of the world. This is obviously a reference to all those whom God has chosen to save in Jesus Christ, and for whom Christ has died. These are the people who have redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, and who are marked with the name of God, and thereby saved from his wrath.

The second death, which is eternal punishment, has no claim on anyone whose name is written in the book of life. As Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 15:26, *“The last enemy to be destroyed is death.”* That glorious day of final victory has come. The last enemy death, is defeated, just as Satan, the beast, the false prophet, and the harlot have already been defeated on the day of Christ Jesus. The curse is no more. There is only life everlasting.

Beloved, we need never fear that day when the books are opened. Yes, we will appear before the throne and be judged according to our deeds. But in God’s sight, we have obeyed his commandments perfectly. He will find no hint or trace or stain of sin in anyone of us. Why is that? Because we have obeyed his

³ Beale, Revelation, 1035.

⁴ Beale, Revelation, 1036.

commandments perfect and have made amends for our every infraction of God's law? No, of course not. On that day God will see us as though we have been perfectly obedient and as though we are without sin. How is this possible? Because Jesus Christ fulfilled the covenant of works and kept the law of Moses. Through faith, his obedience is credited to us. Furthermore, Jesus Christ died for every sin we have ever committed or will ever commit in the future, no matter how public or private it may have been. How can God punish us a second time because of those sins for which Christ has already been punished?

Therefore, even though we will appear before the throne to give an account of our deeds, for us, this is not judgment day. Indeed, for God's people judgment day is not in the future. Judgment day is in the past. The day we dread most has already come and gone. For a Christian, judgment day was Good Friday, when Jesus Christ bore God's wrath and anger toward our sins in his own body on the cross. When the scene depicted here by John finally comes, we appear before the throne, having already been made spotless and blameless. We will appear before the throne clothed in the white robe of Christ's perfect righteousness. Our names have been written in the book of life and the second death has no power over us. We will live in Christ's presence for ever and ever.

So when the books are opened, we need not fear. In that great day, Christ's perfect obedience is credited to us, and his shed blood has washed away all our sins. The book will say that we are without sin and perfectly obedient! And because of Jesus Christ, God will say to us, "well done, good and faithful servant, come and share your master's happiness!" Amen!