

Judgment According to Works

Revelation 20:11-15

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When John Owen, the great Puritan, lay on his deathbed his secretary wrote (in his name) to a friend, "I am still in the land of the living." "Stop," said Owen. "Change that and say, I am yet in the land of the dying, but I hope soon to be in the land of the living." What makes the difference between being among the dying versus being among the living? There are many ways to say it: the living are those who are justified; the living are those who have been born again; the living are those who have been called by God out of darkness and into His marvelous light. Here in the last part of Revelation 20, we learn of a new way to talk about those who will live forever: they are those whose names are written in the book of life. So, when the roll is called up yonder, will we be there? Yes, we will. But further, we must ask the question about which book we will be judged by. There are two possibilities: either our deeds will all be read out loud for the whole world to hear, and we will be judged by those works according to strict justice, or else our sins will all be erased from that book, and only the deeds done in righteousness will remain. That will only happen if our names are written in the book of life.

The passage starts out at the great white throne. Every word is important. It is a great throne, not because it is necessarily large, but because there is no other throne higher and more influential. This is the truly supreme court. There is no appeal from this court. There is no king higher than the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. The throne is white because that symbolizes the purity of the One Who sits upon it. The Lord is white, in order to match the bride, who is also dressed in white. Of course, let's not miss the fact that there is a throne. The judge is also the king.

From the throne, the passage moves to some important aspects of the person Who sits on it. It is, of course, God the Father Who sits on the throne. In His presence, the earth and the sky flee away, and no place is found for them. This is surely proof that we have, in this passage, arrived at the end of all things. The first heaven and the first earth are passed away, says the beginning of chapter 21. That verse looks back to this verse 11. The first earth and heaven have to pass away in order for the new heavens and the new earth to take its place. It is not only the people who are going to be judged, but also the creation will be renewed. It will be the end of everything

as we know it now, and the beginning of a glorious future, of which this world is only a shadow.

But before that new heavens and new earth can be settled with God's elect from every nation, tongue, language, and people, the dead must be judged. How could it be otherwise? God cannot have unworthy people in His new creation, where all evil will be eradicated. So all the dead must be judged. Notice that John includes the small and the great. No doubt there are those who are very powerful in the world throughout history who believed that they were above judgment, and that the God of the universe would not dare to judge them. They will receive quite the surprise on judgment day. Of course, people who are small in the eyes of the world might think that they will be able to slip by without God noticing them. They also will be in for a surprise on judgment day. No one will be able to escape being there on judgment day.

What follows next is the opening of the books. There is one set of books detailing all the actions of everyone who has ever lived. Obviously, that is quite the library! Then there is one other book, the (single!) book of life. In that book is written the name of everyone who belongs to Jesus Christ. How do these two books relate to each other? This is a very important question, not only for understanding the passage, but also for our own peace of mind. The Bible does not spell out every detail of how this works. However, there are some things that we can say. Based on Romans 8, we can say that since there is no condemnation left for those who belong to Jesus Christ, therefore there will be no reading aloud of the sins of believers. Those deeds are erased from the books forever. The only ones left are the good deeds, which will all be clear to the entire world. Jesus' blood cleanses us of all our sins, past, present, and future. There is, therefore, nothing to fear for those whose names are in the Lamb's book of life. Indeed, the good deeds of the saints will be read aloud so that the world will know that God did, in fact, correctly justify His people. You see, lots of people in this world will slander Christians by saying that God couldn't love them, since they're not good enough. In one sense, that's true. God doesn't love us because we're good enough. Instead, God's love makes us good enough. As one writer puts it, the works which are exhibited to the world are enough to show the world which master the person served in life. Of course, for unbelievers, the works will be the standard by which they are judged. But that is not the case for

believers. For believers, our good works are the only ones which will be shown, and, what's more, they will prove that God really did justify us. This can help us to make sense of some passages that would otherwise be very puzzling. There are some passages that seem to suggest that Christians also will be judged according to their works. But if that means that we won't get to heaven unless we're good enough, then that would flatly contradict other passages which plainly tell us that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone. The state of Christians right now is that they will never be more saved than they are right now. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Therefore, there is no condemnation even possible on judgment day for believers. We have absolutely nothing to fear. However, the opening of the books for unbelievers present them with great terrors. For every deed that they thought was going to be secret, and never found out, will be there for all to see. There is nothing secret that will not be revealed. It will all become plain as day.

So the next question is this: how can we know whether our names are written in the Lamb's book of life or not? That is a very important question! Obviously, we cannot have a look inside that book before the time comes. And some people have lapsed into despair because they cannot read their name in that book. One thinks of the great Christian theologian and philosopher Gordon Clark, who often doubted his salvation because he could not look into that book to see if his name was written there. Thankfully for us, there is a much easier way to know if our names are there. It is quite simple. In fact, it is so simple that many times people don't believe that it could actually give them the assurance they are looking for. But it is quite simple: do you believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior? If you do, then your name is written in the Lamb's book of life. Ah, but then, what does it mean to believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior? Let's unpack that a bit and see what we have. Firstly, it involves knowing and agreeing with the doctrine that Jesus Christ is God Almighty. Secondly, it involves knowing and believing that Jesus Christ took our place on the cross, that He took the punishment for the sin which we committed, and that He earned the righteousness we needed to earn, but could not. Thirdly, it involves entrusting your life to the King. It means surrendering your position as lord of your life, and instead making Jesus the captain of your soul.

For some of us, we may have been involved with some sin for so long

that we have very little hope that we are truly saved. Even for such people, there is hope, and it is found in this idea: did you ever know for certain even once that you belonged to God? If you can answer that question yes, then you can make the next step of understanding that God never leaves those who are His. He always finishes what He starts.

All of this encouragement is directed at those of us who doubt that we are saved, and who tremble at the threats of Scripture. However, and this is a big caveat, none of what we have said is the least encouragement to sin. For any of us who presume that we are Christians, and therefore justify our sin by saying that since we are saved, we can do whatever we want, and all our sin is forgiven, there is a very different message here. The phrase “according to what they had done” rings like a refrain in this passage. Remember that the works will show the world to which master we belong. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. The fruit of repentance is the fruit that we need to see. There is no comfort here for those who presume. There are several ways that people presume. Firstly, there are those who presume on their mere presence in the church. They have always gone to church. Shouldn't that be enough? Ah, but we do not get into heaven by means of going to church. We get into heaven through our faith in Jesus Christ, who has earned the way for us. Another way people presume is by twisting eternal assurance into a justification for sin. They argue that if Jesus forgives us our sins, then He will forgive the sin I am about to commit. While that would be true of the believer, it is not true of the unbeliever. And that kind of mental attitude is not one that the Christian has. The Christian always grieves over his own sin. He does not rush to justify it. The Christian is quick to point out his own sins, and slow to point out other people's sins. The Christian believes himself or herself the chief of sinners, and that no one else comes close. For it is only as we have a clear picture of our own sin, that we also have a clear picture of the glory of forgiveness.

Lastly, look at the eradication of our greatest enemies. Last week we saw that Satan was cast into the lake of fire. Here we see Death and Hades cast into the lake of fire. They will become irrelevant in the new heavens and new earth. They will have no place at all. The sea, often symbolic of chaos and death, will also be irrelevant. As we will see, Lord-willing, in the coming weeks, there will be no more sea in the new heavens and the new earth. This is what it means, ultimately, for Jesus to win the final battle. It

means that He not only conquers Satan, but also death and the holding place for the dead, Hades. There will be no more need of them, if everyone, believer and unbeliever alike, is resurrected beyond the reach of physical death.

Do not skip lightly, however, over the very last verse, which is a sobering one. Those whose names were not found written in the Lamb's book of life were thrown into the lake of fire. The eternal condemnation is what that means. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and surrender your life to Him as your Savior and Lord, and you have nothing to fear from that. Instead, you can look forward to the new heavens and the new earth, which will be laid out for us so gloriously in the coming weeks as we look at the end of all things in Revelation 21 and 22. When the Roll is Called up Yonder, will you be there?