

Revelation

Part Fifty-Three
Judgment Day
(*Revelation 20:11-15*)

With Study Questions

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1/15/2023

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Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. ¹² And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is *the Book of Life*. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. ¹³ The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. ¹⁴ Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. ¹⁵ And anyone not found written in the *Book of Life* was cast into the lake of fire (*Revelation 20:11-15*).

Introduction

I took a brief walk at the beach this past week and came upon a bench with a name on it. It was the name of an old friend I went to high school with. He recently passed away and this bench was erected as a memorial. There happened to be another bench right next to it. There was a name on that bench as well. Another old friend who I also went to high school with.

I found it melancholy.

As a pastor I probably spend more time in cemeteries than most people. It does give one pause. Especially when you notice that many of the markers are revealing that the deceased have been dead longer than they were alive. There was a time when churches were built around cemeteries. It provided a weekly reminder of one's inevitable future. It also marked out the departed saints that you were about to worship with. The church militant (those still fighting it out on earth) and the church triumphant (those in the presence of God) are, after all, one church (*Hebrews 12:22-24*).

We are (at least some level) disembarking from the disagreements and controversies of Revelation. There is general (not entirely of course) agreement among Christians regarding the end of chapter twenty and the next two chapters. Chapters twenty-one and twenty-two provide a somewhat detailed description of the full consummation of the New Heaven and New Earth. But before we are met with expressions of the hope of glory, we see Judgment Day.

Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them (Revelation 20:11).

People tend to live as if we will never have to give an account. We take the sins of our past and seek to bind them, cast them into a pit, shut the pit and seal it up. If we wait long enough, we can forget them.

Even David, a man after God's own heart, became so comfortable with his own sin-he so learned to live with it (maybe, as is so popular today, he forgave himself), that when he heard a sort-of parable of a man who did what he did (only what he did was worse) he didn't recognize that the parable was about him.

We should ever bear the fruit of repentance and seek restitution and reconciliation (Luke 19:8; Matthew 5:24). It is not a very Christian thing to live at odds with others.

If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all (Romans 12:18).

Paul pushes this pursuit of reconciliation to the point where we should even be willing, in some cases, to "**suffer wrong**" in order for peace to be achieved (1 Corinthians 6:1-8).

But how does one make restitution with God? After all, when David came to his senses, he realized that the most significant offended party of his infraction was not Bathsheba or even Uriah. It was God.

Against You, You only, have I sinned, And done *this* evil in Your sight – That You may be found just when You speak, And blameless when You judge (Psalm 51:4).

One should not view this as David being dismissive of his sin against humans any more than Jesus is calling His followers to actually hate their family members if they wish to follow Him (Luke 14:26). He is making a point by comparison (that our love for Christ should make our love for the ones we love most, appear as hate by comparison).

In our sins against one another, we have a bigger problem than we realize. Calvin expresses David's passion and disquietude thusly:

But I conceive his meaning to be, that though all the world should pardon him, he felt that God was the Judge with whom he had to do, that conscience hailed him to his bar, and that the voice of man could administer no relief to him, however much he might be disposed to forgive, or to excuse, or to flatter. His eyes and his whole soul were directed to God, regardless of what man might think or say concerning him. To one who is thus overwhelmed with a sense of the dreadfulness of being obnoxious to the sentence of God, there needs no other accuser.¹

There is a bigger problem than most realize. We see a “**great white throne**” indicating an authoritative, pure and righteous judgment.

...because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead (Acts 17:31).

That “**earth and heaven**” are failing in their efforts to flee teaches us of the all-encompassing nature of this judgment. This judgment is vast in its width and depth. It is a judgment of angels (Jude 6) and every single person (2 Corinthians 5:10). It is a judgment of every word (Matthew 12:36), every thought, every secret thing (Romans 2:16; 1 Corinthians 4:5).

We may be able to make restitution to others. We may have the will, the resources, the stamina and the conviction to bring offended parties a

¹ Calvin, J., & Anderson, J. (2010). [*Commentary on the Book of Psalms*](#) (Vol. 2, pp. 285–286). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

sense of peace, justice, and the solace of knowing that things have been made right.

In fact, the lack of willingness to forgive an offender may cast us in very troubled waters with God. We do pray, after all, that God will forgive us our debts as we forgive others (Matthew 6:12). The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant holds a horrible conclusion for one who refuses to forgive. Even church, as a corporate body, is called to forgive an offender, **“lest one be swallowed up in too much sorrow” (2 Corinthians 2:7).**

But forgiveness before God is an entirely different matter. We forgive because we have been forgiven. This type of thinking led Paul to view himself as a debtor to all (Romans 1:14). But it is a great mistake to view God as a debtor (Romans 4:4). If we piled up all of our good works and handed them over to God, we would still be unprofitable servants (Luke 17:7-10). As Paul writes,

**Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid
(Romans 11:35)?**

The only thing God owes us is judgment. And the books referred to in the next verses tell the tale. And once a person dies, there is no editing of those books.

And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is *the Book of Life*. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. ¹³ The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works (Revelation 20:12, 13).

Truly, this is the ultimate great and terrible Day of the Lord (Joel 2:31; Zephaniah 1:14-16; Malachi 4:1-5). Nobody, living or dead, great or small can escape this day. World leaders, superstars, average Joes, the weak and impoverished all fall into the same category. It is the great equalizer.

Books are opened. There are various views regarding these books. The books may include the law of God. For through the law comes the knowledge of sin (Romans 3:20). The books appear to include our works-

books of indictment. These books might be compared to ledgers of debt. A debt that is undeniable and unpayable. The Law has spoken.

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God (Romans 3:19).

There is no special pleading. No appealing to extenuating or mitigation circumstances. The celestial courtroom is a cacophony of guilt. The prosecutor's case is sure and true, and everyone knows it.

There is one hope and one hope only. Let us recall the great theme through Revelation. It is the overcoming of evil. It is the call to persevere. Those seven churches were surrounded by the thorns and shallow ground of deceit and persecution. Ever around them was the temptation to follow ungodly religion and/or oppressive political tyranny.

It is on this day, Judgment Day, that it will be painful manifest that lies and power, regardless of their veneer of beauty and wisdom, have no ability to deliver. There is one hope. Jesus had taught earlier.

The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. ⁶He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches (Revelation 3:5, 6).

Our only hope is that our names are written in the “**book of life.**” And how do you know if this is true of you? How do you know if you are in that number that Jesus will confess before His Father? How is one declared fit for heaven? As we shall see in the coming chapters, only the righteous will be heaven (Revelation 21:8, 27; 22:15). How does that include you or me?

What is the means by which we are declared righteous before a holy God? Can there be anything in the whole domain of human existence that is a more pressing or critical question to ask than “**What must I do to be saved**” (Acts 16:30)?

It might do us well to take a moment to express what it is not! It is not your good works, religious or otherwise.

...knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified (Galatians 2:16).

Some say that Paul is speaking of specific religious/Jewish works (Kosher laws, circumcision, sabbath laws). But a recurring theme in Scripture is that man is incapable of appeasing God in his entirety.

We are not declared righteous by virtue of our membership in a religious community. Should we be in a religious community? Most certainly! It is defiant rebellion and extremely unhealthy and weakening to exclude oneself from the covenant community, generally expressed in local churches. But mere inclusion is wholly insufficient. The New Covenant is replete with baptized members in good standing who were later declared shipwrecked in faith (1 Timothy 1:19, 20; 1 Peter 2:1-3; Jude 10-13; 1 John 2:19).

Participation in the sacraments will not bring a person peace with God. Directly after his baptism Simon was warned that his heart revealed his soul may perish (Acts 8:13-24). Paul was not unclear that it is very possible to take the Lord's **Supper in such a way as to "drink[s] judgment" on oneself** (1 Corinthians 11:29).

And it is not your faithfulness. No, not even faithfulness in the true religion. There is a massively popular current theologian who is working, at least tangentially with the Reformed community (he's actually Church of England) by the name of N. T. Wright who is swimming in these waters-conflating as it were faith and faithfulness.²

I want to be cautious here, because Wright is like the one of the rabbits at the shooting gallery in an amusement park. As soon as you soften your finger from the trigger, the rabbit reappears as a shrew. The New Perspective on Paul, as it is called is a moving target that continually seems to reshape itself.

Nonetheless, as a pastor, I must assume some responsibility for the potential influence of such a highly published personality in my era. I will minimize my comments.

² <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/faith-and-faithfulness>

When R. C. Sproul was asked about Wright's doctrine of imputation (that by faith, the active obedience of Christ is given to us), Sproul said it "destroys sola fide (that we're saved by faith alone) and the gospel with it." When asked if the view is heretical, Sproul responded that "If it isn't, there's no such thing as heresy."³ Sola Fide, salvation by faith alone is a central critical doctrine of the Christian faith. As Martin Luther taught:

Justification by faith alone is the foundation upon which the church stands or falls.

Should we seek to be faithful? Most certainly. But on this great and terrible day of judgment, my faithfulness is not in any of those books. The Christian faith is tailor-made for the sick and sinful. It was in the height of his maturity that Paul declared himself to be a wretched sinner (Romans 7:24).

The glorious words of Matthew, quoting Isaiah, teaches us:

...a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench (Matthew 12:20).

However much we have ever felt the smothering nature of our own feebleness, how much more on this day of judgment!! O how very hungry we would be for the Lord's Supper if our eyes were opened this moment to our bruised and smoldering condition! How clear that we are saved by faith alone!

Finally, we read of the destruction of that last enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26).

Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. ¹⁵ And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:14, 15).

I lack the poetic skills to convey the agony of a "lake of fire." Let not any of us find comfort in the notion of our loved ones and neighbors who may enter it. May we ever seek to blow that warning trumpet (Ezekiel 33:6). This is central to the faith.

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ROGbx8eaM>

Years ago, I was at a conference where a young pastor was speaking of his young children. His words were profound and have stayed with me these many years. He said the first thing he wants his children to learn is how to die. Because it is not until they know how to die that they will truly know how to live.

Questions for Study

1. Why do you suppose churches were built in cemeteries (page 2)?
2. How do you deal with sin in your life when it comes to others? How did David deal with it (pages 3, 4)?
3. Is it important to be forgiving? Why or why not (page 3)?
4. How do you explain that David sinned only against God (pages 3, 4)?
5. Can you explain the difference of sinning against other people versus sinning against God (pages 4, 5)?
6. What/who will be judged on Judgment Day (pages 5, 6)?
7. What will be of no help on Judgment Day (pages 6, 7)?
8. What must we do to be saved (page 8)?