

## **Truths that Transform: “Our Final Destiny”, Sandy Young, BCF 2010.05.16**

**Revelation 20:11 - 21:8** 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. <sup>12</sup> And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. <sup>13</sup> And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. <sup>14</sup> Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. <sup>15</sup> And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. <sup>1</sup> Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup> And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. <sup>4</sup> He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." <sup>5</sup> And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." <sup>6</sup> And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. <sup>7</sup> The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. <sup>8</sup> But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death."

Every spring when we begin work in our garden beds my wife faithfully, gently but firmly, points things out to me that are growing up. "This is a weed, this is not a weed..." She says this because I belong to the scorched earth policy of gardening: anything bulldozed and covered in mulch looks good. Based on the plant's identity we take one of two actions: pull it up and cast it aside, or leave it to grow and bloom.

In Matthew 13 Jesus told a parable about a field growing with two kinds of plants, wheat and darnel, which was troublesome a weed that looked like wheat but had poisonous seeds. Because the plants are in such close proximity & look alike, they are allowed to grow to maturity and then the harvest would commence with the wheat going into the barn and the weeds going into a bonfire. This was a parable about the two destinies, one of which every person who has ever lived will experience. This is further illustrated in the last chapters of the last book of the Bible, Revelation. (And with this topic we will conclude our series on *Truths That Transform*.)

In Revelation 20:11 - 21:8 there are five important images to consider:

- A great white throne
- A book of life
- A fiery lake
- A beautiful city
- A spring of water

### **1. A great white throne... *final judgment is coming!* (20:11-12)**

In John's visions thrones represent dominion or rule. The great throne represents God's dominion (sovereignty, rule), and his right to judge all persons and things. It is "great" because it is final and comprehensive, and it is "white" because his judgment is pure, impartial and fair. God himself is seated upon the throne to judge and to rectify evil.

This is an image of comfort to those who have lived under persecution, injustice, or under unjust rulers. Various readers of the book of Revelation were (or had been) living under autocratic, capricious, and ravenous rulers which in John's visions are portrayed as beasts. (cf Rev 13:12; 16:10) God has the right and the power to rectify injustice - how this comforts those who have experienced injustice, abusive rule, or lawlessness. [E.g. stories from Kefa Sempangi about life under Idi Amin, his legacy of evil and ruthlessness.]

This comfort is built upon the OT foundation of the goodness of righteousness and justice. (We tend to think anything judgmental is bad.) ...

*Psalm 9:7-8 But the LORD sits enthroned forever; he has established his throne for justice, and he judges the world with righteousness; he judges the peoples with uprightness. Psalm 89:14 Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne... (see also Psalm 97:2)*

This is a fearful image for all who do evil. Numbers 32:23 says, "and be sure your sin will find you out." Heaven and earth (containing everything created) is pictured as fleeing to find safety in being out of reach, but there is no place to hide. All other things in creation which seem "big" will shrink to nothing in light of this final judgment.

It is a final comprehensive. Great and small, and all that they have done (v. 12-13). Not intentions, but actual deeds, are judged. All places where the dead have been - the sea, death, Hades - are emptied (v 13). Was evil done, was good not done? Some have suggested that since this judgment follows after the first resurrection of Rev 20, believers will not be a part of this judgment. This makes sense as our judgment took place in Christ upon the cross and at the judgment seat of Christ at his return. Be that as it may, we are not specifically told that here. What I want to establish is God's right to judge and the fearfulness of facing him without a Mediator.

We have tests and exams and finals, we can have research rejected, certification denied, the IRS can audit us and take our money, banks can foreclose on our homes, police can stop you and fine you for speeding, you can be taken to court and to jail... There's judgment and reckoning all around us. Yet we never stop to think that maybe the creator and the One who wrote his law on our hearts will also have HIS day of reckoning, which will by comparison pale all other judgments into nothing. You can fail in this life and lose it all. But that's nothing in comparison with God's final judgment. "Earth and sky fled away..."

Application: know that you will face judgment and be prepared. "...it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment..." (Hebrews 9:27) We think that we are not that bad, we haven't killed anyone (though we have hated plenty)... Too many of us are going through life neglecting, ignoring, suppressing this truth, but it will not go away. One day all we have done will be seen for what it really is. C. S. Lewis wrote, "The safest road to hell is the gradual one - the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts." And further, J I Packer writes...

*"The modern habit throughout the Christian church is to play this subject down. Those who still believe in the wrath of God (not all do) say little about it; perhaps they do not think much about it. To an age which has unashamedly sold itself to the gods of greed, pride, sex, and self-will, the church mumbles on about God's kindness, but says virtually nothing about His judgment...The fact is that the subject of divine wrath has become taboo in modern society, and Christians by and large have accepted the taboo and conditioned themselves never to raise the subject." (J. I. Packer)*

**2. A book of life...** *although our works reveal our nature, and may determine degree of reward or punishment, our destiny is determined by whether our names are in the Lamb's book of life. (20:13-15)*

**The books...** "what they had done." What we do is important (not just our intentions)... Yet Jesus viewed works as the fruit of one's nature and identity. A tree and its fruit. Names in one book, evidences in the other. The fruit reveals the character...

**Matthew 3:10** (John the Baptist)... *Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Matthew 7:17-19* So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. **Matthew 12:33** "Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit."

**Primacy of the book of life.** What is the relationship between the books and the Book? Perhaps one is like a grade book and the one is the final listing of those who made the final grade. Yet, we find that the book of life was written before creation: **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...*

Hence destiny not determined by how good we are by the end of our life, but by something from before we were born. This book represents our relationship and union with Christ: **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.*" This was spoken to men who were followers of Jesus. They were not seeking some kind of religious perfection or moral superiority or being humanitarian do-gooders. These were men who trusted and followed the Lord Jesus.

So how important, then, is a faith relationship with Jesus Christ!

**3. A fiery lake.** *There is a place of final and eternal punishment. (20:14-15)*

The lake of fire is also described as the outer darkness, or the word used in Jesus's day, *gehenna*, after the ever-burning garbage dump in the valley of Hinnom. The bible recognizes only two final destinies. Always presented as eternal, with out end...

**Daniel 12:2** *And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.*

**Malachi 4:1-3** *"For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the Lord of hosts."*

**Matthew 25:46** *And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."*

**John 3:36** *Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.*

**2 Thessalonians 1:5-10** *This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering-- since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be*

*glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.*

Many find the doctrine of eternal punishment unthinkable or unjust. There are five very important truths we must keep in mind...

- a) That God is just and righteous. The foundation of his throne is built upon righteousness. His final judgment will be fair and just. If an eternal hell exists, then it is perfectly fair and just that it does.
- b) That God loves people but he also love goodness, holiness and his own perfect will. The vindication of his holiness and justice is more important than giving happiness to unrepentant creatures. It is written about Jesus... *"Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness..."* (Hebrews 1:8f) *"God is loving, but a major part of what He loves is His own perfect character, with a major aspect being the importance of maintaining justice and righteousness. Though God pardons sinners and makes provision for expressing His mercy, He will never negotiate His justice. If we fail to understand that, the cross of Christ will be utterly meaningless to us."* (R. C. Sproul, *The Truth of the Cross*)
- c) That God is more pure and sin more evil than we think & it is more deserving of eternal judgment. For example, many people living under the rule of Nazi Germany were passive and silent at what was being done to the Jews. In 1945 at the liberation of Auschwitz & other camps the world was scandalized by what had happened in Germany. To many it seemed Nazi policies were not so serious at first, but later came to be seen in its offensiveness. It is very likely that the things we think are "no big deal" - white lies, gray areas, "mistakes" we make - are in fact much more heinous to God and the holy angels than we can imagine.
- d) Further, it is one thing to reject the law and rule of God, but it is infinitely more serious to reject his offer of forgiveness and reconciliation in Son crucified for our sins. (Hebrews 2:3)
- e) Finally, that each one will be permanentized in his attitude toward God at the end of life. At some point the basic direction of our life will be set in concrete, and we receive an eternity of what it is we love and follow... if God, then all of God and his blessing, but if not-God then an eternity of alienation from God. The "gnashing of teeth" represents not remorse but anger at God, which will remain forever intact. Such creatures will be unable to even desire repentance and forgiveness.

Much of the Bible is about sin and evil, how it entered our world (Gen 3), how destructive it is, how Christ dealt with the guilt and power of sin and evil upon the cross, and how he will return to rectify all things and banish evil. Jesus "takes away the sin of the world" -- its guilt and penalty, he takes away its power for those who walk with him, and finally he takes away sin from the presence of his creation.

*"The Bible is the story of God's counteroffensive against sin. It is the grand narrative of how God made it right, how he is making it right, and how he will one day make it right finally and forever."* - (Greg Gilbert, *What is the Gospel?*)

Please note: we are not saved by being afraid of hell. We are not saved by just choosing heaven. We are not saved by trying harder to be good. We are saved by faith, a faith which sees the goodness of God and which leads us to repentance. We see the evil of sin itself and do not merely wish to avoid punishment. Such faith is part of a new life imparted from God.

**4. A beautiful city.** *There is a heaven -- rather a new heavens, new earth and new Jerusalem, the holy City. (21:1-4)*

How is the new creation described? There will be a new heavens and new earth (v.1). Jesus' resurrection body was glorious but also material. He had "flesh and bones" (Luke 24:39). We were created for, and redeemed for, a life on a good world, not to float around in some wispy form on clouds.

And "the sea was no more". This does not mean there won't be any large bodies of water. Seas were part of God's good creation (Gen 1:10). But for many it was a place of death (ch 20:13). And "the sea" may be referring to that source of evil, as Revelation 13:1 tells of "*the beast rising out of the sea...*" There will be no more sea of that kind.

And there is a city (v. 2) ... it is holy, it is stunningly beautiful, and it is called the new Jerusalem. I do not tend to think of cities in this way, as cities then and now are often repositories of evil and uncleanness. But this city is holy and beautiful, and fulfills all that God intended for Jerusalem... that is, it would be a place where people could live harmoniously in the presence of God and enjoy others without fear or hatred. It will be that community that humans have longed for and sought for over the centuries. There will be activity, friendship, and worship. Occasionally, we catch glimpses of love, goodness and beauty. In an act of kindness, in beautiful music, in a stunning landscape, a child's voice and smile, in the faithfulness of love. But quickly it fades and we wonder if something like that is ever possible permanently. And this book is telling us that it is and it is coming.

But our final estate is more than a place and more than people. It is about a Person (v. 3, 4) and our final restoration into the unveiled presence of God. It is to be filled with love and to be the recipient of God's infinite love, not in part, but in fullness. Verse 4 was put into a hymn by Isaac Watts in these words...

"His own soft hand shall wipe the tears  
From every weeping eye,  
And pains, and groans, and griefs, and fears,  
And death itself, shall die." (Isaac Watts)

The new creation is a place, a people, and most of all, a Person. How do we become a part of this? How do we begin to taste this goodness, this truth, this beauty?

**5. A spring of water.** *God invites us to come to him, and promises us eternal life. (21:5-8)*

The one who makes all things new, who is the beginning and end of history, now gives his word, his word that can be trusted: that he will in grace give water of life to the one who thirsts.

He will give to drink from the spring of the water of life. In the ancient world (as in many places today) clean, good-tasting water was hard to come by. In Israel, where it was dry, water was found in community wells, or kept in cisterns, or found in seasonal *wadis*. Elsewhere in the Roman world water was often bad-tasting or unclean, and aqueducts had to be built to transport water. Few things in life are as satisfying and necessary as fresh, clean water. E.g. Collecting water from mountain spring as a boy; hiking and camping in those few places where the water was clean enough to drink from a stream.

Jesus said that he came to bring that to us, namely life, real life, eternal life, refreshing life...

**John 7:37-38** "*If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'*"

To whom will he give this, who are the thirsty? The context would demand that the thirsting are those who long for the God who is revealed here, for this God and for the kind of world he will create, for a world of righteousness.

**Matthew 5:6** *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.* **2 Peter 3:13** *But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.*

How will he give it? He will give it gratuitously, that is by grace, at no cost to us. (But at great cost to him!)

**Isaiah 55:1** *"Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.*

**John 4:10** *Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."*

How can he do this? How can he be the Judge over all, and yet stoop to wipe the tears from our eyes? The answer is the Cross. At the beginning of John's visions of what is to come is the vision of the Lamb who was slain (Revelation 5:6). God is love, but he cannot show gratuitous love when his holy nature is offended. Because his just anger was poured out on Christ at the cross, he now can give himself in infinite love to the repentant. There are two places where God's wrath for sins is poured out: at Calvary on the cross, and at the great white throne. Those who take refuge in Christ find him to be their Sin-bearer; those who do not will bear the guilt for their own sin at the end.

Finally, the two destinies are again shown: the one who overcomes (v.7), and those who are outside (v.8) Those who overcome are those who are born of God. 1 John 5:4... *For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world--our faith.* We must overcome, and we will overcome. I believe that overcoming is a gift given as part of eternal life...

**John 6:37, 39** *All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. ... And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.*

God is the Author of all that is good, true and beautiful. Is it his world you want, you thirst for? Have you come to him by faith in his grace to receive life? Have you begun already to drink at his well?

Often when I'm driving in an area I'm not familiar, I find myself in a lane that turns only one way. ("This lane right turn only") There are only two destinies in this life. And we will find at some point we are locked into one lane! We need to ask ourselves, which road am I traveling on?

