

Revelation 20:11–15

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[0 : 00] This scripture reading comes from the book of Revelation, chapter 20, verses 11 through 15. And at this time, all children from age 3 through grade 5 may be dismissed to Team Kids and Team Tots.

And for the rest of you, again, that was Revelation 20, verses 11 through 15. Would you please stand with me in honor of God's word? 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. 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. 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. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire.

[1 : 08] This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God. You may be seated. Well, it should be stated right at the outset, shouldn't it? It should be said that we live in a world where not everyone believes in a great and final day of universal resurrection and universal judgment.

The closest parallel, many, if not most, in our own culture come to an apocalyptic-like end-timed day of reckoning.

It's the time of their own burial. In the book, Pigeon Feathers, John Updike expressed this sort of final day of reckoning with dramatic and vivid imagery.

[2 : 20] He writes, Without warning, David was visited by an exact vision of death. A long hole in the ground.

No wider than your body. Down which you were drawn while the white faces recede. You try to reach them, but your arms are pinned.

Shovels pour dirt in your face. There. You will be forever.

In an upright position. Blind. And silent. And in time, no one will remember you. And you will never be called.

As strata of rock shift, Your fingers elongate. And your teeth are distended sideways in a great underground grimace.

[3 : 32] Indistinguishable from a strip of chalk. And the earth tumbles on.

And the sun expires. In unaltered darkness reigns.

Where once there were stars. That's a dramatic, vivid depiction of the belief of the one who holds to what is commonly referred to as naturalism.

No resurrection. No resurrection. No glorious gospel hope. But also, thankfully, No need to worry yourself Over the idea of ever standing before God.

What a wonderful notion. Of never having to give an account for the deeds done in the flesh while you were in the land of the living.

[4 : 42] Well, what we have been seeing these weeks in the book of Revelation is that the Bible challenges the fundamental underpinnings of naturalism most severely.

And John's apocalypse encourages all of us to think differently for a time about the true end of the human state.

John's apocalypse isn't shy about matching Updike's dramatic portrayal, is it? The earth's apparent, eternal grip on the universal dead throughout the book of Revelation have been shown to us to be temporary.

That there is a day coming when the very soil of the earth will be loosened. I think of the ways that it was repetitively spoken of throughout the book.

Lightning flashes, thunder peals, and an earthquake comes of which the earth has never seen before or since.

[6 : 11] John wrote those very things when he told us of the cutting of the seventh seal. The blowing of the seventh trumpet.

The pouring out of the seventh bowl. On that day, the great angel will call out across the earth, Fallen!

Fallen! Is Babylon the great. And the rider on the white horse will race across the continents, calling everyone to account.

And now we come to our text, where again, the Bible considers the great and final day of the Lord. I think of the way that it's kind of rolled through Revelation, the way runners round through the 4x100 relay.

[7 : 23] They hand the baton, and then they run their leg. And then the baton is passed again. And now we have arrived across the final turn, and this is the last great, full depiction of John concerning the great and final day of judgment.

The narrative flow is easy. The narrative flow is easy enough to follow, isn't it? Three simple phrases. If you're looking for hangers in regard to the narrative flow, it's simply this.

The dead are raised. In contrast to Updike's depiction that they remain in the ground. The dead are raised.

The books are opened. Judgment is rendered. That's the narrative flow. And that is what he would have us consider again today.

The dead are raised. Look at verses 11 and the beginning of verse 12. Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it.

[8 : 39] From his presence, earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne.

Three simple observations from these words.

The first, the throne, depicted in verse 11, seems to be one of unsurpassed stature. Then I saw a great white throne.

The word great. It's almost as if he wants you to understand that what he sees has been enlarged in scale.

You're at your computer screen. You click on a particular image. You zoom. Until the object itself almost overwhelms the screen on your computer.

[9 : 52] That almost seems to be what he's displaying here. Then I saw a great, this enlarged throne. Unsurpassed stature.

And then it says it's a white throne. It seems to speak of a rule that is good or healthy. Whatever this throne is, it is pure, righteous, holy.

We are looking, then, through John's description, at a throne of unsurpassed stature, not only in size and in immensity, but in glory and in goodness.

In purity. It conjures up, I would think, if we were reading this through all the way from beginning to end, which we won't do today. It would conjure up, in the reader's mind, the distant echo of what they heard much earlier in chapter 4.

Or, in verse 2, where there was a throne, where John writes, At once I was in spirit, and behold, a throne in heaven with one seated on the throne.

[11 : 08] It's this throne. It's this throne. The same throne. Or, in chapter 5, in verse 7, where we saw the Lamb of God, where John writes, He took the scroll from Him who was seated on the throne.

And now we've come, at the close of the book, after all of those visions that rolled forth the execution of God's will on the earth from the throne, we are now brought back to the throne.

All the world brought back to this throne of unsurpassed stature. But not only that, it seems, secondly, that it is a throne of unchallenged authority.

Unlike the rule under which everyone in our world exercises authority. Look at the phrase, again, verse 11. It's quite a striking phrase.

From His presence, earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. I mean, that's a symbol of unchallenged authority.

[12:14] Imagine the earth and sky without a place to hide. You know, we live in a world that makes quite a bit of noise about our limited power and our limited exercise of authority.

We chase it. You do as well as I. We tout it. We think ourselves big. Even with the smallest measure of it.

Have you ever been asked to run something for someone and thought, Wow, that makes me feel pretty good. A bit of authority has come my way. Have you ever turned in something that you just knew would put you on the top side of all your peers?

A sense of satisfaction in it. Have you ever met someone or stood close to someone who had a limited measure of earthly authority and almost found yourself swelling with importance based upon your proximity to greatness?

I'll tell a brief humorous story on myself. Not long ago, our church met at 51st and Greenwood.

[13:47] Across the street of which the president-elect of the United States lived, Barack Obama. And to enter the church, some of you will recall this with vividness, you had to clear the secret service by showing your license, which gave you access.

And the German shepherds. And occasionally, some of you had to actually gain entrance only after clearing through the wand. And then you entered church thinking, Wow, I'm definitely on the inside of something, aren't I?

I remember leaving one day in my suburban. Well, you know, the president travels in a line of suburbans.

I love those vehicles. In fact, I think when all my kids are gone from the home, I might just buy another one. But at any rate, I remember one Sunday afternoon after this service, leaving the security checkpoint, watching the police car back up so I could get out, coming up and our whole family inside, and my sunglasses on and the tinted windows in the back, and a group of people standing on the corner and walking.

And I remember turning the corner and just gunning it a little bit and saying in my own mind, I bet they wonder who's driving in that car.

[15:18] I mean, we are funny people, aren't we, when it comes to power? Well, now you know the warped personality of your own pastor.

But that's why this verse in the Bible is so good for us. It's clear-headed. It's healthy. It puts it all back in perspective. The one who sits on this throne is so great that the earth and the sky flee from its presence.

This is unchallenged authority. This is not something that you or I participate in via proximity. If the earth has no place to hide, neither will you.

Even if you rise above the soil all at six and a half feet. This is quite a throne he's brought us to. It ought to put us in our place. It's of unsurpassed stature. It's of unchallenged authority. And evidently, it holds universal accountability.

[16:34] Look at verse 12, the beginning. And I saw the dead. But notice the universal sense. There's a comma and then this addition. Great and small.

This kind of inclusion. The big guys and the little guys. Universal accountability here.

Not just even the fact that what the earth is giving way to. But notice he wants you to understand that all.

All the dead. No matter where they may be. Are accountable to this one. Look at verse 13a. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it.

As if to say, you're not safe if you landed there, you know. Death itself is included. Hades, the place of the dead is included.

[17:34] All of these things in our text. And look at 13c. The very end there. They were judged. Comma. Each one of them. Comma. What an addition that is in the text.

Great and small. From the sea and the earth. Death. Hades. Each one of them. Unsurpassed stature.

Unchallenged authority. Universal accountability. This is the teaching of the Bible. That there is a day. Where we all.

Each one. You and me. Individually and collectively. Will stand before God's throne. That the dead are raised.

I was thinking, of course, that the writer. must have had in his mind. Not only the New Testament scriptures.

[18 : 42] But some dependence upon the Jewish scriptures. The Hebrew scriptures. And the book of Daniel. You don't need to turn there now. But let me just read. Two verses from.

An apocalyptic vision. Given to Daniel of old. In chapter 7. He says in verses 9 and 10. As I looked. Thrones were placed.

And the ancient of days. Took his seat. His clothing was white. As snow. And the hair of his head. Like pure wool. His throne was fiery flames.

Its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire. Issued and came out from before him. A thousand. Thousands. Served him. And ten thousand.

Times ten thousand. Stood before him. The court. Sat in judgment. And then Daniel has this phrase.

[19 : 40] And the books were opened. There seems to me to be a literary dependence. In regard to the vision that John has here seen.

In his apocalyptic retelling. That the books were opened. I mean that is the second narrative flow. Now in our text. Take a look.

Verse 12. And I saw the dead. Great and small. Standing before the throne. And the books were opened. Then another book was opened. Which is the book of life.

And then again in verse 15. If anyone's name was not found. Written in the book of life. He was thrown into the lake of fire. The dead are raised.

The books are opened. What are these books? I'm glad to know there are books in heaven. I'm sure that should be of some comfort to many of you as well.

[20 : 37] Although the younger set of you. Which are only watching YouTube and videos now. You might actually be bored in heaven. But indeed for the rest of us. There will be books. Well these books are special books.

The books are opened. What are they? And what are we to make of them? Well notice. In the text. The first mention of books is plural.

And it's distinguished from what is later called. The book of life. There are books open. Plural. In addition. There is the book of life.

Now because we sit in a Christian congregation. And not many of you perhaps. Are familiar with the Jewish traditions. Which of course. John's readers would have been.

Immersed in. Culturally. If not otherwise. The early Jewish tradition. Was that God keeps at least. Two heavenly books.

[21 : 40] Oftentimes thought of to be. Three. In addition to the book of life. That there was a set of books. One book that recorded. The righteous deeds of the godly.

I think of David. In Psalm 56.8. Where he is. Pleading to God for help. And he makes reference of his tears. And his own deeds. He almost implies.

Which you have written in your book. The other book. The other book. The other book. Was the deeds of the wicked. Or. The unrighteous things. That were done. Now.

In a modern day. Hyde Park context. Under the umbrella. Of a. Of a. Of a. World class institution. Here. That is predominantly Jewish.

In its orientation. Many of you will be familiar. That with this coming fall. There is the annual. Sober. Celebration. Of the Jewish holiday.

[22 : 37] Rosh Hashanah. Every fall. This day of judgment. Is celebrated. Soberly.! In which. Symbolically.

All the inhabitants. Of the earth. Pass before their creator. For judgment. It's going to come again. This fall. Three books.

Will be opened. First. One that. Describes. In a sense. Symbolically. The fate. Of the wicked. The second. The fate. Of the righteous.

And the third. The. The individuals. Whose fate. Is yet to be determined. And so. For ten days. This fall. In the streets. Of Hyde Park. Our friends. And our neighbors. Will have to prepare.

Between. The celebration.

[23 : 31] Of Rosh Hashanah. Culminating. In Yom Kippur. That great. Day of judgment. And there will be. Ten days. Of repentance. Of prayers.

Of introspection. So that. When one. One. Parades. By the presence. Of God. Much like. Sheep. Asked to go.

In front of the shepherd. At the conclusion. Of the ten days. You want your name. Where? You don't want to be. In the undetermined. Roll call. No.

You want them. To put your name. In the book of life. For another year. Revelation 20. Is borrowing. On.

On. On this. In regard to. Its description. Of the great. And final. Day. Of judgment. When the dead. Are raised. The books. Will be opened. And what he is saying.

[24 : 29] Here. Is that to his readers. And to us. Who read it today. We will all. One day. Be asked. To pass. By. God. And the books.

Will be opened. A register. Of sorts. Concerning. Our behavior. In the world.

According to the. Sermon on the mount. Jesus. Would say. That it isn't merely. Our own.

Interpretive. Force. Of the law. By which we will be judged. But his.

Interpretation. Of it. Namely. That it extends. Beyond just. Righteous. And unrighteous. Actions. To the very. Core. Of our. Attitude. And to the fullness. Of its.

Divine. Intent. Well. I don't know about you. I'm not looking forward. To that day. Imagine.

[25 : 33] Imagine. That you had some. Edward. Munk. when we are forced to acknowledge our own deeds.

That's not a good day. Not a good day. I think of the human precedent of this kind of book, even as it is explained in the Hebrew Scriptures, in the book of Ezra, you know, where they had begun to rebuild the wall and the neighboring people were thinking, my goodness, this is really going to happen.

God's people are really going to accomplish something in the world. And they set to writing a letter back. And they want the authority who sits on the throne to know, you need to go read your books because the activity and behavior of this people has been seditious.

We're familiar with books, registries, accountings, records of national deeds. But here it is of individual deeds, each and every person who was ever asked to live.

Wow. That is a jarring biblical truth that goes beyond any terror evoked by Updike's naturalism.

[27 : 27] Not only will the earth's grip be loosened upon me after I am in my grave and you upon yours, but you will find yourself one day standing before the living God.

There is a day coming when the books will be opened and the actions and attitudes of our hearts will be laid bare and the truth will be made known.

I have to say this about that day. I hope it's a private meeting. I hope it's a private meeting, but I do not know.

Perhaps what will give God greater glory is to see it all laid bare. For there even my most righteous acts will be seen as filthy rags.

The result, when the dead are raised and the books are opened, is that proper judgment will be rendered.

[28 : 38] That's the third force of this narrative. Look at the very end of verse 12. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books according to what they had done.

Look at the middle of verse 13. The dead who were in them and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done.

Verses 14 and 15. The proper judgment actually moves all the way forward to being thrown into the lake of fire, which we have seen elsewhere in Revelation and in the Scriptures and through the interpretive voice of Jesus as a place where the worm never dies.

This eternity to it all. And that will be the lot for those of us when we pass before God, our Creator, if our works are deemed not to measure up to the fullness of His desires.

The word here really is our works. Well, this is a very helpful thing to know. Because we see here that the Bible's teaching, even from these few five verses, not only challenges naturalism, but all of a sudden is challenging universalism as well.

[30 : 06] I mean, as much as you and I would like to believe the sentimental notion that we don't have anything to worry about, when you read the Scriptures, we shall not all live happily ever after.

Well, what are we to do? Where are you to go? So, interestingly, hope is given and grace is extended.

Look at the latter half of verse 12, and this is critical for all of us. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And by implication, those who are written in the book of life are somehow able to enter into God's presence.

You get that by implication in verse 15, because we see that if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into that lake of fire.

The book of life. We have seen this before in Revelation 2, haven't we? I think back to chapter 13 in verse 8, you might see it there, or we'll do so in a second.

[31 : 23] We're also going to see it again. Well, let me show it to you. 13.8, since it's been a few weeks since we were back there. Final phrase, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain.

Well, that's interesting. There's an amplification of the term. The book of life is now amplified to be that of the Lamb that was slain. In 17.8, we saw this book previously.

The beast that you saw was and is not and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction. 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 because it was and is not and is to come. We'll see this again in the coming week or two when we arrive at chapter 21 and verse 27. But nothing unclean will ever enter it, that's heaven, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

Two of the other three occurrences have this amplified understanding that the book of life is the book of life that belongs to the Lamb, the Lamb that was slain, which of course brings us all the way back to that first initial vision of the throne where the Lion of the tribe of Judah is able to execute God's will in the world and when he looks to see who the Lion of the tribe of Judah is, he sees that it is the Lamb that was slain and that Lamb is equated with Jesus of Nazareth whose work on the cross somehow in God's plan turned away God's wrath from our sins and onto himself that we might know him.

[33 : 22] Well, that's a book you want your name in. I have a friend recently who gave me a book and I always look first to see if they inscribe anything.

You know, you want to see what they write in it. There was something written in it for which I was grateful. Well, this is not one that you just be grateful there's writing in it.

This is one you want your name in it. Well, that's going to require some affiliation or knowledge or relationship to the Lamb.

How does one get written into this book?

Well, the phrase there isn't this interesting they get judged according to what they had done. They get judged according to what they had done. I assume that you're going to get saved according to what you have done. Your works.

[34 : 25] And indeed this is true. But it needs explaining. Take a look earlier in the book of Revelation chapter 2 and 3.

I know I'm having you run backward and forward in Revelation in the last few sermons but that's because by the time we close I want you to have a handle on the whole. Take a look at the letter to the church in Ephesus verse 2 chapter 2.

I know your works. Here's these works again. These are the deeds. You toil in your patient endurance and how you cannot bear with those who are evil but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not and found them to be false.

I know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my namesake and you have not grown weary. Then he says but I have this against you that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen repent and do the works or return to the works you did at first. Well what were those works? They were holding fast to his word and not being misled by those who are evil and calling themselves apostles and were putting forth a teaching that was contrary to the gospel that they had received.

[35 : 50] That was the work. Take a look at the church to Thyatira chapter 2 and verse 18 and following. Verse 19 I know your works your love and faith and service and patient endurance and that your latter works exceeded the first but this I have against you what is the work that he does not like that they tolerate Jezebel who calls herself a prophetess in his teaching and seducing his servants to practice sexual immorality.

The works were holding fast to the word that had been given. Take a look at the letter to the church to Philadelphia verse 8 or 8 of chapter 3 I know your works behold I have set before you an open door which no one is able to shut I know that you have but little power and you have kept what?

My word. Throughout Revelation the deeds according to what you have done or the works that you do have a strong relationship to the word that had been given and this is so even in the gospels this is very important and one that you ought to turn to even if you haven't looked at anything yet today you ought to scrounge up a bible next to you I don't care what translation it is and you ought to turn to John in chapter 5 for we are trying to determine what these works are well let me cut right to the chase for the sake of time and have you turn forward even past John 5 for the moment to John chapter 6 in verse 28 and 29 this really is the conclusion of the matter which had been argued in chapter 5 but here it is nonetheless then they said to him what must we do to be doing the works of God that's the right question isn't it it's the one we ought to be asking

Jesus answered to him this is the work of God that you believe in him whom he has sent because the work in chapter 5 that God was doing the father was raising people from the dead he was giving them life and Jesus was saying that I have come to give life and you my followers will do even greater works as you proclaim the message of the gospel people will what believe this is it and this is important for us when we come to Revelation 20 because now in the short space of five verses the Bible has not only challenged naturalism which we have to now think about it has also brought challenges to universalism but here it actually brings it all home on behaviorism or a misguided notion of the reward of altruism hope for we would like to think that if I am just selfless and if I just think of other people and if I just do the right thing that when I pass before God those things that I have done will be of such a stature and such a size and of such a consequence that I will be okay pray but remember this nobody shall enter into the gates based upon the strength of your altruistic hopes the question we must all ask setting our own works aside for a moment what do you think of the work of Christ are you willing to affirm that he is God's son entered into time lived a righteous life died a substitutionary death rose as a consequence of his righteous deeds entered into the presence of the father and is capable of declaring you righteous in God's presence although your book doesn't measure up this is the great hopeful phrase of revelation then another book was opened the book of life well I hope that this is helpful to you it's certainly been a helpful text to me the

[40 : 49] Bible's claim is clear the dead will be raised the books will be opened proper judgment will be rendered and in Christ I might be in a good way both now and forever more and you and your friends and your family do they know of this book of life do they know that forgiveness is offered in Jesus name really although it's raining outside this could be the best day of your life to embrace by faith the revelation of John to have a fresh start with God while time remains while you are in the land of the living oh lord haste the day when my faith shall be sight the clouds be rolled back as a scroll the trump shall resound and the lord shall descend even so even so may it be well with your soul our heavenly father we thank you for this word for the matter of fact way that the scriptures inform our lives

I pray that there would be many here today who embrace this message by faith that they would believe that we would do the one great work before all the others in Jesus name amen I want to encourage