

Revelation 20: 11-15

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[0 : 00] Let's turn then to Revelation 20 and we'll focus our thoughts around the verses 11 to 15.

Then I saw a great white throne and him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heavens fled away, and there was found no place for them.

I want us just to think together about the subject of the judgment of God, and that is the final judgment.

Every judgment of God in history is but a forerunner, it's a portender of the judgment to come, the final judgment, which this passage in Revelation 20 deals with.

Now just as a wee aside and by way of an introduction, it is noteworthy that in the calendar of the Jewish people, they have their new year at this time of year, usually somewhere between the middle of September and into early October, depending on how the calendar operates, the lunar calendar.

[1 : 24] And at the moment this year, New Year's Day for them was on the 10th of September. And all the way up to their New Year's Day in their synagogues, they have the blowing of the trumpet, the shofar, the ram's horn.

And that is very much associated in the Bible with judgment. You find, for example, in 1 Thessalonians, when Jesus returns, the Lord will return with the voice of the archangel and the trumpet of God.

And the trumpet of God is associated with the final judgment of God. And it's an interesting thing if you've been, I don't suppose you've been, but if you were to witness the blowing of the shofar, it's got a very piercing sound.

There are three different sounds they use, three different pieces that they blow. And each of them has its own penetrating note. And it moves people, it stirs them.

And I mention that in the context of judgment to come, because judgment to come is something that should stir us. The thought of it, the realization that it's coming, that it's inescapable.

[2 : 50] It may not be an easy thing, of course, to think about the judgment to come, I grant. But it is important, and those of us who believe the Bible are bound to be those who think about judgment to come.

And we should think about it frequently. It's not something we should dismiss from our minds, because it's something that comes up again and again, both in Scripture itself and in the very Psalms we sing.

We highlighted a few there this morning, Psalm 96, Psalm 98, Psalm 9, deliberately just to remind us of the emphasis that the judgment to come figures very much in the mind of God.

And that's an important subject, therefore. It's something to bring our minds to think about, and to think about it frequently, in order to do, as Peter says, to make our calling and our election sure.

We ought to think in such a way that we are brought to return again to the Lord, we're brought to stir ourselves up and be more resolved that by His grace we will walk in His ways.

[4 : 17] For those of us who profess His name publicly, it's a time to stir ourselves to a greater urgency in seeking the salvation of people around us.

And really, it ought not to matter to us that people around us mock the whole idea of a judgment to come and of Jesus judging the world.

They do that, we know. But it's not a new story, it's an old story. Peter talks about it in his second letter, where is the promise of His coming?

We've heard all this before. It hasn't happened. Therefore, it's not going to happen. But that's not the biblical way of looking at it.

God has assured us that it is coming, that it is a day appointed by Him, and no one will escape it. And it's interesting that in the book of Acts, Acts 17, where Paul is speaking to the philosophers at Mars Hill, the Areopagus, he shows them that the resurrection of Christ and the judgment of God are bound together.

[5 : 38] They're inseparably bound together in God's mind and in God's purpose. Acts 17, 31. He has appointed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness, whereof He has given this guarantee in that He raised His Son from the dead.

And therefore, it is important, as we look at the subject, to consider what John has to say in his teaching here.

And the starting point is obviously the appearance of the judge. Verse 11, Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away.

I saw a great white throne and one who sat upon it. Now, it's important to, as we look at this, to remind ourselves of the whole scope of God speaking about judgment to come.

This is not an isolated text that we're using. You go back to the very beginning, or more or less the beginning, of human history, which we have a record of in the Old Testament.

[7 : 07] And you will see that God is judge. God is many things. God is a God of love and grace, of compassion.

He's a God of salvation. But He's also God, the righteous judge. And that is borne out by the way that He destroyed the earth through the flood.

The whole of the people of the earth except the eight who were saved. All perished. God determined to judge.

And He did. In the life of Abraham, to take another example, a practical example, the great man of faith, when he was pleading for Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities of the plain, he did so on the basis that God was the righteous judge of all the earth.

And that He wouldn't do anything unjust. You remember He said, well, if there's 50 godly people in these towns, these cities, surely He'll not destroy them for the sake of the 50.

[8 : 17] And of course, then He began to wind His way down until He was down into virtually single figures.

God is the righteous judge, the judge of all the earth. And Abraham knew that in his own day and appealed to God to spare these cities on the understanding that though He was the righteous judge, He was a judge who exercised himself according to the rules of His righteousness.

He wouldn't do something that was other than absolutely right. The Psalms we sing, moving on, the Psalms we sing, as we mentioned in the introduction, are full of references to the Lord as judge.

Not only judge in time, we've noticed that too, these are portents of the final judgment. Every judgment upon mankind, upon individuals, families, nations, and so on, are portents of the judgment to come.

That's the Bible's picture of things. We stand there in Psalm 9 that God has prepared His throne for judgment.

[9 : 45] Verse 8, He shall judge the world in righteousness. These are just snapshots to remind us that God underscores that whatever else He is, He has this in His purpose too, that He will judge the world in righteousness.

The day is coming when the final judgment will come. Moving to the New Testament, then, just to back up the appearance of the judge, and I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it.

In the New Testament, it is clear that judgment has been committed to the Son of God. Peter, interestingly, in the Acts of the Apostles, in chapter 10, verse 42, says that Jesus is the one whom God ordained as a judge of the living and the dead.

We mentioned Acts 17, 31, about Paul speaking to the philosophers in Athens. Why do I mention these?

Because the apostolic preaching had in it the reality of judgment to come and the Son of God's place, the God ordained judge.

[11 : 19] We could wind back for a moment and perhaps we should to remind ourselves that Jesus himself was unambiguous about his role as a judge.

He knew it. In John chapter 5, talking to the Jews in verse 27, he tells us the Father has given him authority to execute judgment because he is the Son of Man.

And the Son of Man is the only name that Jesus uses of himself. That was his name for himself, the Son of Man.

and it can easily be demonstrated that he reflected on the glorious vision in Daniel, the book of Daniel, of the Son of Man who would come to judge.

And he tells us, Jesus tells us in John 5, 27, as we've said, that the Father put that authority, given that legal right to be the judge.

[12:37] That's why we read in Matthew 25 from verse 31, because Jesus pictured himself coming in great glory to sit on the throne of his glory.

and then he begins to unpack the judgment of that day. His appearance is an awesome appearance on the throne of his glory.

And therefore, you see, the picture that is with us here in John's Revelation links in with these references we've made both to the Old Testament and the New, the Apostolic preaching and the Saviour's own words.

So it is important to lay to heart the reality of judgment to come, of the final judgment, that awesome spectacle, then I saw a great white throne and him who sat on it before whose face the earth and the heavens fled away.

Who can comprehend, even in figurative language, what an awesome spectacle, that will be. But the point is, the promise that God will judge the world in righteousness by the man of his right hand is fulfilled and John sees in the prophetic vision the day coming.

[14:14] The second thing we want to consider then, just briefly, those summoned to judgment. Verse 12, And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God.

I saw the dead, small and great. In a word, all mankind, the sinful sons of men, in all the ages, past, present, and future, all gathered together.

And they're there before the throne. And again, this is not something that is reserved for the last book of the Bible.

We're told about it. Isaiah has it, in Isaiah 45, verse 23, As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow, every tongue shall acknowledge that in the Lord we have righteousness.

Now that means, not that everybody will acknowledge him in a believing way, but that everybody will have to acknowledge him. They'll have no option.

[15:31] there simply won't be any room for argument and debate. And they will acknowledge with reluctance, and they'll bow the knee with reluctance, but they'll have to do it.

And it's that very message that Paul uses in Philippians 2, verses 10 and 12, where he pictures Jesus exalted to heaven.

given the name that is above every other name, that in the name of Jesus every knee shall bow. See, that's where Paul got this Isaiah 45, he got it there, every knee shall bow, and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

But when that day comes, there'll be no repentance and faith anymore. for those who have to, simply have to, confess the truth.

And he goes on and he says, I saw the dead small and great. He sees the great people of the earth, those who were gifted in many ways, and he sees the insignificant, the little and the ordinary.

[16:59] Countless millions raised from the dust, standing before God. This is something that we ought to lay to heart.

This is something we ought to be moved by and constrained by for ourselves, but for others too, if we have a heart for them. live in the light of this reality, live in the light of the day that's coming when small and great, all mankind will be there.

There will be no one let off, even the Lord's people will be there. all those who walked this earth, all those who came from the womb, and those who never came from the womb, we can't comprehend the how of it, but it will happen.

Every person will be there. every atom that made a person a person will come together and reconstitute that person to rise again.

The ungodly in their body of contempt, Christ's own in a glorious resurrection body. And the thing is, the more you ponder this, the more awesome it is.

[18:35] I don't want to get too graphic here, it would be easy enough and profitable, but it matters not at one level where the dust of this one or that one is, how separated the dust is, the atoms are.

We're dealing with God. We're dealing with one who can call them all together, the leg, the head, whatever.

we're dealing with God. We're dealing with something here that at one level we cannot fully comprehend, but he will call and it will be done.

Just as we were thinking on Thursday about the creative power of Christ, the eternal word, he spoke and it was done.

He made the blocks to make what he wanted to make. And in the same way, he'll call and bring the atoms back to this one and that one to countless millions.

[19 : 50] And whether it's the dust that's there at Auschwitz or wherever else, the killing fields in Cambodia and Africa and China and wherever, in Scotland too, it'll all happen.

Every conceivable place that there's dust, atoms of human beings, they'll be called out. The sea too, he says, will give up its dead.

Verse 13. And those folks who have a forlorn hope that somehow, somewhere, sometime, the body they've consigned to a capsule into space, space will give up its dead too.

we cannot fathom the logistics of it. We cannot fathom the spectacle of it. But there's enough here to help us to get a grip of the impending reality of it.

We can take God's word on it. He'll do it. it. And therefore, friends, we need to think more about this day and its implications for us, for those whom we love, for those we rub shoulders with.

[21 : 25] You see, it'll do us no good to be critical of others. If I've heard it once, I've heard it a thousand times, the thing with going to church, all the hypocrites go to church, that's a cop-out.

That's a blatant cop-out. I'm not a hypocrite, and I don't go to church. That's what they're saying.

That's an affront to God. If they believe in him, they want to know what he has to say to them.

But you see, we're in the church, and it'll do no good to be critical of others, of other people in their religious views. We may contend earnestly with them, we may use every argument we can to persuade them of the truth in Jesus, but we're not going to be critical in the censorious way.

No rather the reality of judgment ought to touch our hearts in such a way that we just want them to come to the Lamb of God, whose book at last will be opened.

And we want to help them see, and ourselves to see, that the only thing that will avail there at the judgment seat of Christ, is himself and faith in him and all his merits.

[22 : 55] Thirdly, the rule of judgment that brings us, you see, to the books were opened, verse 12, and the books were opened. Notice it does say the books were opened.

In Jewish thinking at this time of year, the books are opened. That's one of the things about New Year, the books are opened, that's what the Orthodox believe. the book of life and the book of condemnation and they want to do all they can to get into the book of life.

That's the thinking. John says the books were opened. The book of God's law written in nature, written in each human heart, that is God's witness within us, that he's there.

Remember how Paul argues, it's not that man doesn't know God, that innate sense of knowing, a sense of the divine, as Calvin has it.

Man knows he's distinct from the animal. He's superior in many ways. He functions in the realm of moral activity.

[24 : 21] He can't get away from it. He may be thoroughly bad, I don't mean he's not bad, but he functions in the realm of moral activity.

And when man is doing his worst, others are saying no. God has put that in man.

man. The book of the Old Testament has it written to tell man that's right, that which you feel innately, inherently as man is right, because God has put it there and now he's written it down.

So that you might learn and know. That you might discover that despite your miserable lost estate, God has a plan.

God unfolds that plan in the Old Testament, in all the types and in all the promises concerning his anointed one. Taken as a whole, the apostle tells us, you've known Timothy the holy scripture since you were a wee boy.

[25 : 37] The Hebrew Bible which is able to make you wise for salvation through faith in the Messiah. The book of the New Testament shows us with perfect transparency the fulfillment of God's promises in his Son, the Savior of sinners.

The book of the New Testament shows us that he is the embodiment of all the shadows and types. He is the only redeemer, the mediator of the new covenant.

We mentioned a moment ago something about what God has put in man, that innate sense of the divine. And the book of conscience is open too.

Conscience that accuses or excuses man. Memory that recalls, memory that forces upon man.

I heard that. I knew that. I turned from that. Conscience will accuse.

[26 : 55] Some of you may recall that the late Douglas Macmillan said on an occasion that one of the most tormenting things for those who are lost will be their memory.

They will remember. They will hate themselves for what they will remember. When the Bible says the former things will be remembered no more, don't misunderstand.

For those who leave this world in a lost state, they will remember. Memory will be an unquenchable fire.

But the book of remembrance too will be opened. Remember how Malachi describes it? Those who feared the Lord spoke often the one to the other and the Lord heard it, he took pleasure in it, and a book of remembrance was written.

for those who talked often of the Lord and thought on his name. And it's important to think about that and our relation to how we think about the Lord and speak about the Lord and enjoy fellowship in the Lord.

[28 : 24] But lastly, the book of life is referred to. Moses knew about it and spoke about it. And usually interpreters see the book of life as the will of God, the decrees of God as they bear on his electing purpose.

That's why it's sometimes called in this book of Revelation the Lamb's book. Those who were known to him and for whom he died.

And all those books combined as the rule of judgment. The books were opened. And another book which was opened is the book of life and the dead were judged.

In other words, the rule of judgment are these books. These books combine and they combine as God's rule of judgment.

According to their works they will be judged. Notice the carefulness of the apostle here. According to their works, that reminds us that judgment is not on account of our works.

[29 : 54] If it were on account of our works, God would be indebted to us. He would be obliged to pay us for all the good works we did.

That's not the good news. God doesn't do us anything. It's not on account of our works.

It's according to them. that has reference to the nature of our works and not the number of them. I did all this, aren't I great?

No, no, it's the nature of the works. It's the quality, as someone has said, and not the quantity. It's what we do by the grace of God, what we do through the Spirit of Christ.

The nature of the works the works that are done through the power of Christ in us. And it's a highly dangerous strategy to imagine that we will be accepted in the judgment on account of our works.

[31 : 07] Not at all. In fact, if we were to go on the quantity of our works and the sheer number, we would be into a works righteousness.

We must abandon that. Yes, of course, we read in Matthew 25, it's important to do the right things. But we can only do the right things, properly speaking, from a Godward perspective through the grace he gives us.

And lastly, the sentence will be executed. There is an assurance through John from the judge, anyone not found, verse 15, written in the book of Life, was cast into the lake of fire.

The point here, mustn't be missed, the point here is that when we are separated at last, if that is the way it will be, from God himself, forever separated from him, it will be on account of what we have not done in response to the good news.

it will be on account of our unbelief. It will be on account of our neglect of the truth. Paul says to the Thessalonians in his second letter that those who will experience the wrath of God to the uttermost will do so because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved.

[33 : 05] And John is unambiguous here, just as unambiguous as the Lord Jesus Christ himself, when he talks about the reality of hell as a conscious thing, as an endless thing, separation from all that is good and holy, and ultimately from God himself.

and whatever else hell is about, it's talked about as a lake of fire, as unquenchable fire, and so on, the everlasting burnings, and so on, whatever else is involved in hell, unquenchable burnings must have to do with a consciousness, an awareness of opportunities lost, of opportunities neglected,

spurned maybe, or simply neglected, a lack of a real commitment to God and to the Lord Jesus Christ, a lack of it, because a lack of it means we haven't got it, I remember years and years ago teaching the

Bible class, we were going through the Proverbs, and one of the Proverbs is, my son says to the Lord, give me your heart, give me your heart, that's commitment, give me your heart, that's what the Lord asks for, and we can really take encouragement, as we can say, we give him our heart, some people say, it's not necessary to be committed, we can still be followers, not so, Jesus requires us to commit, and to follow, that's what following is about, and we must let nothing keep us back, from seeing the thing his way, commitment, to follow, let us live in the, with a sense of the reality, of judgment to come, and the dire consequences, of not making our calling and election sure, here in time, because it's only as we commit ourselves wholeheartedly to him, believing his word, taking it to heart, that we will be able to say, with old top lady, when I saw her through tracts unknown, see thee on thy judgment throne, rock of ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself, let me hide myself, in thee, may we do that, and be blessed, amen.