

The Great White Throne

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[0 : 00] Let's turn to the passage that we read, Revelation 20 and verse 11.

It's a short passage, so I'm going to read it once again. Verse 11, 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. 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.

[1 : 06] When we were thinking about the earlier part of this chapter, I tried to explain to you the three views that there were of what is known as the millennium.

And I set you a challenge, the millennium challenge, if you like. And I ask you not just to look into them, but to choose which one of these three views you preferred.

And I wonder which one you did prefer. For many, many hundreds of years, in fact, all the way back to the early church, there have been differences of opinion as to this chapter, and particularly what the meaning of the millennium or the thousand years is.

There's one thing for sure, it means something, it means one of these three views, and it will happen in whatever form God has planned.

But whatever our view of the first part of chapter 20, and indeed the rest of the book of Revelation, there seems to be to be no question about this little passage here.

[2 : 18] It says quite simply that the world will come to an end. It says also that Jesus will come again, and it says that the dead will rise.

It tells us that everyone will be judged, and that there will be a final heaven for those whose names are written in the book of life, and there will be a lost eternity called here the lake of fire for those whose names are not written in the book of life.

Now, it strikes me that if we accept this passage, there is nothing as crucial as those ultimate events. Whatever is important in this world, the prospect of having to give an account to God is surely the one which takes priority in our thinking and in our lives.

It shouldn't surprise us to read here that the dead will rise. That event is promised clearly in other parts of the Bible. Jesus said, for example, in John chapter 5 and verse 28 and 29, Do not marvel at this, he said, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice, and they will come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.

So these are the words of Jesus himself, and we read other words in chapter 25 of Matthew that state very clearly to us that each one of us will appear before the judgment throne of God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

[4 : 03] And what this means, of course, is that there will be a resurrection of every single person who has been killed or who has died in this world.

And then there will be a great division. Those, as the Bible says, those who have done good and those who have done evil. And it's important for us to qualify what that means.

Who are those who have done good or those who have done evil? At first reading, it may appear that God is going to judge between those who have lived respectable, outwardly, civil, moral lives, and those who haven't.

But then where do you draw the line? Where do you draw the line, for example, between someone who turns over a new leaf in midlife or those people who regret some of the things they did in their youth?

And just because a person lived a certain lifestyle in his youth, does that mean that he is consigned to punishment just because of that? Is God going to judge us on the way that we have lived our lives?

[5 : 06] And then what sector or what era in our lives is He going to judge us on? It's a can of worms when we even think of God judging us on the basis of what we have done alone.

And we're going to see in a few moments that God will judge us ultimately not on what we have done, but ultimately on our relationship to Jesus Christ. And that's for a very, very important reason.

And the reason is this, that if we are in Jesus Christ, our sin is forgiven. It is paid for. We are no longer in our sin. All that we have done wrong in the past has been wiped away.

All the guilt has been taken away. And therefore, we are ready to meet God. And that's why I say without any hesitation at all that it's only Jesus that can prepare us to meet with God.

And it's only by asking for His forgiveness that we can be made ready for that day. And ultimately, that is what we will be judged upon, a relationship to Jesus Christ, because He is the only one who can take away our sin.

[6 : 12] Now, let's make sure that we understand those words that we've just read, that some will rise to who have done good, and some will rise who have done evil.

And therefore, God will decide on the basis of what our relationship to Jesus has been. So, this passage is about the judgment, the judgment.

And Paul tells us that we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ. There's nothing surprising in this. You'll find it in other parts of the Bible.

Acts chapter 17, for example, in verse 30 and 31, where Paul says, Jesus says in Matthew chapter 10, Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town, when he's talking about the towns who resisted and who rejected the gospel.

And then in Matthew 25, as we just read, when the Son of Man comes, says Jesus, in His glory, and all the angels with Him, He will sit on His glorious throne.

[7 : 39] Before Him will be gathered all the nations, and He will separate people one from another, and the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And then in 1 Corinthians chapter 4 and verse 5, you'll forgive me for citing all these references, but I want to impress upon you that this is not just revelation.

All over the Bible, all over the New Testament, there are reminders of what is inevitable and what is certain. Paul says this, Therefore, do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart.

Then each one will receive his commendation from God. And as we all know, the verse Hebrews chapter 9, it is appointed unto man once to die, and after that comes judgment.

So judgment is something that is found all over the New Testament. As a certainty and as a promise, each one of us is accountable to God. And on the basis of that judgment and that verdict will be where we spend our eternity, either in eternal life or eternal darkness.

Now some people think that every sermon should be about this. Some people judge the quality of a sermon by whether or not the preacher has talked about hell.

[9 : 05] If you haven't talked about hell, you haven't preached at all, according to some people. And the reason for that is because not only do they believe that real preaching always has to include the threat of hell, but that it is in that threat that people are saved.

Well, if I believed that if I preached hell every single sermon, that someone, because of that, would be saved, I would preach hell every single sermon.

No question at all. If I thought that there was some kind of formula, some kind of issue or subject by which someone would come to Christ automatically if you preached that, then of course, every preacher, every sensible preacher in the world would be preaching this all the time.

But the reason I don't preach this all the time is because it doesn't appear in every chapter and every verse of the Bible. And if it doesn't appear in some chapters and some verses, then I won't preach it.

Because our job as preachers is to preach what's there in front of us. So, if I'm preaching on 1 Corinthians 13 about love, about love suffers long, love is kind, love does not keep a record or long, that has no mention of hell at all.

[10 : 19] So, I'm not going to preach hell. I'm not going to drag hell and judgment into 1 Corinthians 13 because 1 Corinthians 13 is not about judgment and not about hell. As preachers, we have to preach what is in front of us with the right, correct proportion and balance.

And so, please don't expect every sermon to have reference to the final judgment or hell. But, it's here right in front of us in black and white.

And so, we are going to preach about it. And we're going to preach about it without any hesitation at all. Why? Because the same reason as we preach every other part of the Bible because we believe and know that this is God's message and God's infallible word.

And we're going to let God, I hope, speak to each one of us. And it is by letting God speak to us, asking Him to open up our eyes that we may see marvelous things out of His word, that God will speak to us and God will convince us Himself of His own word.

No preacher ever convinced a single person by himself. And there's no turn of phrase or form of words or one passage or another that's going to automatically save a single person.

[11 : 32] Only God, by His Spirit, using His word, can come into your heart tonight and draw you to Himself. But here, we've done this study on Revelation, and here we're at the final parts of chapter 20, and we're going to be talking about our accountability to God.

And first of all, I'm going to just spend a few moments thinking of how sensible, how logical it is that we are accountable to God. And I'm going to say two things.

First of all, if we are made in the image of God, as is stated plainly for us in Genesis chapter 1 and 2, God created Adam and Eve in His likeness and in His image to reflect the person and the being of God, then surely, if Adam and Eve chose as they did to reject that and to turn their back away from God and to pursue their own self-centered interests and every generation that came after them, despite what they were designed to be and everything that God gave them to reflect His image, surely, we are accountable for that action.

It stands to reason that if we bear the image of God and have failed, or rather I should say refused, to live up to that image, then do you really think that God is going to say, well, that's okay?

After designing us and making us for that very purpose and we have gone, God has said one thing and we have done the opposite and spent our whole lives doing so, we are accountable to God for the way in which we have lived our lives and for the measure to which we have lived up to that one commandment that God has given to us, you shall love the Lord with all your heart and mind and soul and strength.

[13 : 33] That is what God requires of every one of us tonight. So please don't start thinking, doing this mental calculation in your head, well, how many bad things have I done? How many good things have I done?

Am I okay or am I not doing? That's not the way it works. You start with God's command to you shall love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and ask yourself this one question, have I and do I or will I or do I want to love the Lord with all my heart, soul, mind and strength?

Why does He ask us to do that? He asks us because that's what He has made us for. So it stands to reason. If He has made us for the purpose of loving Him and living for Him and obeying Him and rejoicing in Him and exalting in Him, then it stands to reason that if we don't, then we are held accountable for it.

That I don't think anybody would argue with. And following on from that is the second logic, which is this, that if God has continued with humankind as He did so, that's what the Bible is all about.

And if He has given us clear, clear statements that spell out for us how He requires us to live, you shall not have any other gods before you.

[14 : 53] Commandment number one, you shall not make unto you any graven image or likeness of anything that's in heaven above or the earth below or the waters under the earth and so on. You shall not take the name of the Lord, your God, in vain.

You shall remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Honor your father and your mother. You shall not kill. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal and so on. These are the way in which God has commanded humankind to live.

Now, are you telling me that on the one hand that He gives these commands and on the other hand He's not going to expect us to be accountable for whether we've kept them or not?

That's like saying, well, there's a 30 mile an hour limit in Laxdale but it doesn't matter if you drive at 60 because nobody's going to touch you. That doesn't make any sense.

Where there is law, there is accountability. Where God has set out His law and made it plain in front of us, then we are accountable for it.

[15 : 56] So, however we try to persuade ourselves, that's the fact. Every one of us is accountable to God.

And it is for that very reason that millions of people this evening as a response to that prospect, they go through leaps and bounds and somersaults to try and get away from it and escape that one final and ultimate reality of our accountability to God.

Some pretend that we are animals. They will try everything that they possibly can to try and prove that we are nothing more than glorified apes or monkeys.

It is in our sinful interest to prove or to try to do so that we are nothing more than animals because if we are, then we're not accountable.

God says we're not animals. God says that we are unique human beings woven together in our mother's womb because he has knit us together before we were ever born.

[17 : 11] He has called, he has placed his own stamp of personality upon us. So we are not, you're not a number, you're not just a lump of atoms and molecules.

You're not just the product of random chance. God has planted within you a recognition of who he is and his reality because you are made in the image of God and yet there is this incredible struggle going on in which there's something that recognizes what I'm saying and yet there's another thing that makes you feel intensely uncomfortable with it because you know that you're not reconciled to God.

You know that you haven't lived as God has commanded you to live. Neither have I. We're all in the same. All have sinned, the Bible says, and come short of the glory of God in what we haven't done in what we failed to do and how we failed to live up to how God has required and commanded us to live.

And of course other people ignore this whole thing. The more they think about it, the more they're determined to escape this nagging truth eating away at them time and time again.

Every so often they're reminded of the reality of it but as soon as possible they run back to the lifestyle in which they have surrounded themselves by people and events and circumstances in which God doesn't get a look in.

[18 : 49] Have you done that this evening? Have you surrounded yourself? You see, people can deliberately organize their lives so that it's like a wall around a city because God is your enemy or at least you see him as your enemy and you've built a wall around your life and surrounded yourself with activities and a lifestyle and a routine in which God is pushed to the outside and you're hoping against hope that there's no break in the wall but every time every so often there is like when a friend of yours dies and when you have to stand in front of an open grave and watch the coffin being lowered into the grave there is nothing as solemn as watching that and you can't escape it and as you watch it going down I don't believe there's anybody that doesn't even for a moment think of what's going to happen when that's me and where am I going to be in relation to God because you know in your hearts of hearts

God the Bible tells us that God has given us a conscience I've spoken about this before because I find it so fascinating the conscience is a voice it's a register within us that knows that there is a God and that knows that God knows us and that's the most perhaps uncomfortable thing of all just what we were singing Lord you have searched me and known me you know my rising up you know my sitting down he knows your address he knows everything about you and then of course there is atheism in which men and women have persuaded themselves by logic and by science and by reason they have come to the conclusion that there is no God well the Bible calls such a person a fool not because the Bible is trying to be derogatory but because God is and that's the starting point that's the ultimate reality that God is and when you choose to believe something that isn't then you're a fool when you believe when you choose to believe the opposite of the truth then of course that is nothing but foolishness

Daniel Webster one of the founding fathers of America was the United States of America was asked once what the greatest thought that ever passed through his head was and he said this my accountability to God my accountability to God let's just look very briefly at this passage and the symbols that we find in the passage as always this passage is full of symbols the first symbol is the great white throne and the one who sat on it what does a white throne bring up in your mind what does that symbolize well it symbolizes because this is the context of judgment it symbolizes perfection and holiness the one who sat on it cannot be anyone else other than God and on this throne this judgment seat there is perfect justice there's no such thing as perfect justice in this world you read about it and hear about it in various places of the world where there is a perversion of judgment there's corruption and where some judges are open to bribes they're on the take and where you have a jury and where the jury is infiltrated by someone who is on the side of the accused and if that person is guilty then the jury will try unlawfully to get that person away with it now in some places that works and in other places well thankfully we have a justice system as I said in my prayer we are thankful for the processes of law and order that we have in our own country whatever complaints that we may have in a modern world we are thankful for it but it still isn't a perfect but this this great white throne is a perfect judgment seat there are no bribes there is no corruption there are no mistakes there are no miscarriages of justice

God has all the evidence that he needs he does not need to have a defense lawyer he doesn't need to have a prosecution lawyer he doesn't need to advise the jury he doesn't need to have expertise in counsel and in senior counsel and in junior counsel and all the other complexities that there are in a modern law courts God knows everything and he is perfectly able to come to his own verdict by himself through that process of justice and analysis and then it tells us that the dead what does it say and I saw the dead great and small standing before the throne that means every single person who has ever died in this world will be raised every single person whether that person has been young or old whether they have died peacefully or in war whether their bodies have been disintegrated however they have died some of them have been buried at sea some of them their bodies are no more physically they have disintegrated into the atmosphere because of time thousands of years they have been in the grave the graves are not there anymore housing schemes have been built where the graves once were and yet every single one has been reconstituted by the power of God and raised once again at the resurrection the unborn those who have died as unborn babies the stillborn the abortions those who have died before birth those who have died in infancy they will be raised once again because they have died as real people they will be raised once again we don't know what age perhaps someone who's died at the age of 95 and has lost all their faculties what age will that person be when that person rises again what age will a person who has been unborn a stillbirth be when that person rises at the day of judgment and the day of resurrection we don't know we don't know but that's the truth that I saw the dead great and small standing before the throne all of them raised what's the next thing that we read well we read

I saw the books were opened the books you notice it's not just one book notice in this passage there are books and there is a book and the first thing we read about is the books it's rather like if you ever see television news coverage of our famous court case you see these lawyers coming into the courts and they're sometimes got a wheelbarrow which looked like a wheelbarrow or a tesco trolley filled with files and that's all the evidence isn't it it's all the evidence because some court cases they need masses and masses and piles and piles of evidence what looks like tons of evidence and that's because court cases need every single shred of information upon which to bring about an accurate and a right and a proper verdict so be it quite rightly so same with God this is symbolic you don't need to think that there are actual books but it's like as if there were and it's all in the mind of

[27:10] God it's all in the heart of God he knows every single thing about us there is nothing about our lives you see you think you're insignificant to God you say I'm not a Christian tonight what interest does God have in me he most certainly does because he made you and he made you because he wanted to make you you are here tonight by his will and his purpose you are not here tonight as an accident nobody is an accident and if you feel that you don't have any significance because of events that have taken place in your life let me tell you this it's God that gives you significance and if you feel that other people are treating you like dirt let me tell you that God he places his affection and his care upon you because you are here by his design he knows everything about you that gives me tremendous encouragement tonight it means that I can go to the person who thinks he's nothing in this world who's unloved living on the fringes of society and I can say to that person you are not a nobody you are a somebody because God has said you are a somebody he has made you and he has given you all the faculties and the minds so that means that nobody you can never write yourself off please never ever write yourself off whatever other people think of you

God thinks of you with care and with seriousness and with affection he wants you to be his the only reason you're not his tonight is because of the sin in your life that needs to be dealt with and God has made provision for that to take it away and to remove it so that you can belong to him and be one of his people and his family his children can I tell you tonight what God can do for you he can adopt you into his family and he can fill you with love that you've never experienced anywhere in this life before you know there's a lot of hurting people in this world I used to when we lived in Aberdeen used to walk down Union Street sometimes used to look at the faces of people walking down Union Street I used to wonder what is it in that person that person is so clearly a hurting person used to think perhaps of a broken home or perhaps cruelty or abuse or having fallen into a wrong lifestyle or whatever

I used to think oh if only that person knew the love of God in her life or his life if only that person discovered what God can do for you and it's the same is true tonight if only you discovered what God has done for you in the person of Jesus Christ when he laid down his life on the cross for people like ourselves don't write yourself off because God has not written you off but the very fact that he knows everything in your life is because you are here for a purpose he takes an interest in you so stop running and stop believing that you know the answer to how to find fulfillment in your own life you don't and you'll never find it come back to God like the prodigal son stop and come back to God come to your senses and say how many servants there are in my father's house

I will arise and go to my father and I will say to him father I have sinned against heaven and against your sight take me back as one of your servants have you ever have you ever stopped and decided now I'm going to go back I'm going to stop running before everything before all the books catch up with me and before it's too late the books contain every single detail written by a God who's never going to get a fact wrong if you were to write a book about your own life tonight you'd be very selective about it wouldn't you if you were to write an autobiography you'd never write the bad stuff or what you thought was the bad stuff and you would doctor it and you would spin it and you would put all kinds of complexions on that book to make sure that the world outside never ever discovered all that and you would you would you would paint your life in a very different picture to what it was in reality a bit like

Facebook isn't it you only put on Facebook what you want people to know about and you select your friends on Facebook don't you you don't put your the older ones will forgive me about that for this I'm probably talking to most of the people here tonight who know what I'm talking about you only put you only give the information that you want to give to certain individuals who know you and you only put certain photographs on it photos that you want people to see you make the statements that you want people to read you don't tell the whole story do you none of us does when I was a boy there was a program on TV called this is your life and every week there was a man called Eamon Andrews he was a big celebrity in my day when I was growing up a TV presenter and every time he would go to a celebrity and he would have this big book and he would go to them by surprise they didn't know that he was coming to meet them with them and he would come to that celebrity and present them with this book this is your life and the whole program would be about that person when they were a child and the school they went to the teachers and they would have the teachers coming on to the show and they'd have the family and the university or the work that he had and all so on and so forth this is your life if God was to walk in that door with a book and saying to me

[33 : 38] Ivor Martin this is your life I can tell you I would be out that door because I know that that book contains everything everything because it's God that's written it that's what the books are about the books are about our lives what we've done everything in them but lastly there's another book only one this time the book of life and what we read about this is that if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life he was thrown into the lake of fire so this time that tells us there is only one ultimate division and the division is marked by those whose names are in the book of life and those whose names are not in the book of life and let me tell you the

I'll tell you in a minute the connection between the book of life and the other books there's a very very important connection between the two things but the very simple fact the very simple reality is this if your name is written in the book of life then God says to you come you blessed of my father into eternal life if your name is not written in the book of life then let me tell you what the bible says these are not my words they are in the bible he was thrown into the lake of fire I'm not going to speculate on the lake of fire I'm not going to try and unpack what these awful words mean because the more I do so the more damage I'll do to the world I'm just going to let God speak for himself that's it he was thrown into the lake of fire that's enough to drive me to the all important question tonight which is this how can

I make sure that my name is in the book of life let me just tell you then in closing whose names are written in the book of life it's dead easy it has to be because God does not want to make this complicated for any one of us it's the most important issue in the world those whose names are in the book of life are those whose sins have been paid for by Jesus Christ and because tonight I my name is in the book of life not because I'm a great person I am not believe me but because my name is in the book of life if God was to come with this is your life I would open I could open that book or he could open that book on page one whatever was written whatever horrendous facts and details were on that there would be a big stamp saying paid page two paid page three paid page four paid all the way through the book of my life

God would say your sins and your iniquities your guilt I will remember no more and that's the connection between the one book of life and the book that contains all my sin that been done away with and as you know Jesus came into this world to do that by dying on the cross so that by coming to him and asking him for mercy and receiving and taking what he has done on the cross to be ours and the payment for our sin I can know that my name is written in that book it's the only way

I can know it's the only assurance I can have that I'm ready to die and ready to stand myself before this great white throne and tonight God is telling us about what will one day happen in order to drive us to one place Calvary where our sin was paid for by the son of God himself this is the most important issue in all the world I would do anything tonight if it was within my capability of saving a single soul I can't this is between you and the Lord but God has made it so simple for every one of us it could not be simple don't believe the voices inside your head that over complicate the gospel and that try to suggest that there's all kinds of complexities that aren't the complexities lie in your head and in your heart the simple matter is this

[39 : 38] Christ gives us an invitation to come to him the only question is will you accept that invitation once and for all so that when it comes to this great day your name will be there and you will spend eternity with the Lord let's pray