

"The Lake of Fire"

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Date: 12 May 2024

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[0 : 00] Good morning, church. Happy Mother's Day. It's good to be with you all today. So you probably noticed from the tank being out that we're celebrating a baptism today.

In fact, this Sunday and next Sunday, over the course of these two Sundays, we'll be celebrating five new baptisms. So we're thrilled to see all that God is doing in our midst as these folks make a public profession of faith in Christ, which is what baptism is all about.

It's a way of saying publicly that we've put our trust in the Lord Jesus as our Redeemer and our King. So if you're new or you're visiting, we're glad you're here to celebrate with us.

Now, every Sunday, what we do is we take a passage from the Bible and we explain it and apply it to our lives. And in order to make sure that we're teaching what the Scripture says and not just picking and choosing what we think we should say, we usually take a whole book of the Bible and then just walk through it section by section.

We don't skip anything. We just let God show us what He says to us in His Word. Now, this spring, we've been walking through the last book of the Bible called Revelation. And we're nearing the end of that book.

[1 : 15] Today, we're looking at the last few verses of Revelation chapter 20. And it's pretty fitting that we're coming to the end of this book as we celebrate baptisms because baptism is a sign, as we said, that someone's come to believe and trust in Jesus as their Redeemer and King.

In other words, baptism is expressing faith that Jesus is the one who saves us. And the end of Revelation shows us both what we're ultimately saved from and what we're ultimately saved for because of Jesus.

The end of Revelation chapter 20 that we'll look at this morning and the beginning of Revelation 21 that we'll look at in two weeks are this perfect pair. Revelation 20 shows us what we're saved from. Revelation 21 shows us what we're saved for. And if we peek ahead, we see that what Christ saves us for is beautiful.

A renewed creation without suffering or death or sickness or sorrow with God in our midst, the fountain of unending joy.

[2 : 33] Just think of all the things that you love in this life. A great meal, a great soccer game, a great friendship. Do you realize that the joys we experience in these created gifts ultimately come from God?

God is our creator. He's the giver of all good gifts. And what Jesus saves us for is a future where sin and decay are finally overcome and we experience these good gifts in full measure.

like a city alive when your team has won the World Series. Go Phillies, right? Do you know they have the best record in baseball right now?

It's unbelievable. Or it's like a feast where the wine doesn't run out. That's what we're saved for. But Revelation also shows us what we're saved from.

What we're saved from. I was listening to a podcast a while ago that was a conversation between Barack Obama and Bruce Springsteen. It was really excellent. If you don't like Bruce Springsteen, you can come talk to me afterwards and I'll convince you otherwise.

[3 : 48] But at one point in the conversation, they were reflecting on what kind of drove them in their professional life. Why were they sort of so driven to do what they did?

Now, here are two men who've reached the pinnacle of success, right? The former president of the United States, a rock and roll legend. And as they were talking about what drove them, Barack Obama said something very insightful.

He said basically, he said, you know, Bruce, ultimately in our work, in our labor, aren't we really looking for salvation? Aren't we hoping that through what we do, we'll find redemption?

I think he's right. I think we're all looking for salvation. The question is, are we looking in the right direction? Revelation 20 shows us.

It shows us ultimately what we need to be saved from. So let me encourage you to turn to Revelation chapter 20. It's page 977 in the Pew Bible. If you're new to the Bible, the big numbers are the chapters and the small numbers are the verses.

[5 : 02] Revelation 20, we're going to look at verses 11 through 15. That's page 977. The author of Revelation is the Apostle John, and God gives him a vision of the end of history in this passage, and John writes this.

He says, 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.

[6 : 18] Let's pray together. Father, help us to understand this weighty passage.

Give us grace. Give us new light as we grapple with these eternal realities. And turn our hearts to your Son this morning, our Lord Jesus, through the power of your Holy Spirit.

Amen. Now, there are three things that this passage shows us, and we'll just walk through each of them this morning. The first thing it shows us is the reality of divine judgment.

The second thing that it shows us is the outcome of divine judgment. And then third, it shows us our hope in the face of divine judgment. So the reality and the outcome and our hope.

So first, let's consider the reality of divine judgment that we see here. Verse 11 is a picture of God in His holiness. By picturing God on a throne, John is saying that God is the world's true king and judge.

[7 : 25] And here, God steps into human history at last. And what happens? His presence is so awesome that earth and sky flee away.

Do you know what happens when someone important walks into a room? What happens? Well, oftentimes what happens is people get quiet and they turn their heads and look. And then, if they want to get somewhere, the crowd just sort of parts to let them through, right?

But here, when the Creator finally steps into creation, earth and sky turn their heads. And they don't just part, they flee before the one who is supremely worthy and awesome.

This is the God who made us and everything else. And what verses 12 through 13 show us is that everyone will give an account to their Creator.

John says, the books will be opened and you will be judged according to what you have done.

There will be universal, final, divine judgment of every human being.

[8 : 33] You and me and everyone will stand before God. Now, maybe you have a hard time believing that the books of your life will be opened before God as your judge.

But let me suggest that there are actually two reasons why you should believe or at least should want to believe in the reality of God's judgment. First reason is that the reality of God's judgment means that your life actually has meaning.

Notice, John says, even the dead are raised to life and are brought before God. Well, why does that happen? Well, because what they've done matters to God. It matters for eternity. You see, friends, your life will continue for eternity because God wills it so, because it matters to Him.

But if there's no final judgment, if death just means at best our memory lives on for a generation or two, then we're forgotten until eventually the sun expands in a few million years and everything turns to ash.

If there's no final judgment, then the day-to-day decisions you make, they don't really matter in the end. It's all empty. It's all without ultimate meaning.

[9 : 49] But if there is a God who sees, who cares, who judges, then your actions do matter.

What you do in this life is not meaningless. So the reality of God's judgment means that our lives actually have meaning. Our lives count because God takes them into account.

So that's one reason we need to believe in God's judgment. But the second reason is that the reality of God's judgment is the only way that you can really live in freedom in this life from human judgment.

If you believe that God is the ultimate judge, then you can actually break free from being controlled by what other humans think or say about you from their judgment. Listen to how Paul the Apostle puts this in 1 Corinthians chapter 4 verses 3 through 4.

Paul writes, he says, But with me it's a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I'm not aware of anything against myself, but I'm not thereby acquitted.

[11:07] It is the Lord who judges me. So what will give you freedom from the opinions and judgments of others?

What will free you from being elated when people think well of you or dejected when people don't? I think there are only two kind of ways at the end of the day.

One way is to say, well, I'm better than those stupid people so I don't care what they think, right? You know, but is that really the sort of person you want to become, right?

Is that the price you want to pay for your freedom to become proud and self-righteous and despising other people, right? You sort of kind of end up becoming a monster that way. No, the only real way to be free from human judgment without ending up like that is to realize that there's a higher court.

Ultimately, you need to be able to say with Paul, it's ultimately the Lord who judges me. That's what really frees you from being enslaved to the judgment of other people.

[12:17] Only the reality of divine judgment will do that. So it turns out we need to believe in this fact of universal final judgment.

And this means your life and mine will be opened up before God's judgment seat on the last day. We will stand before our Creator and the books will be opened. And every thought and every word and every deed will matter and will come out into the open before the gaze of God.

So that's the reality of judgment. But what will the outcome of that judgment be? Well, that takes us to our second point, the outcome of divine judgment. And this point brings us face to face with what is perhaps the most sobering truth that all of us must come to terms with.

Because the question is, what do we deserve apart from Christ? I think our knee-jerk reaction is to say, well, I'm a good person, right?

So I deserve something good. But when we say, I'm a good person, what standard are we using?

[13:35] Are we actually measuring ourselves against God's word for us, against God's standard for us? Or are we really just measuring ourselves against other people? If we're not measuring ourselves according to God's standard, word, then when we say or think, I'm a good person, all that you can really mean is, I'm a better person than some other people I know of.

It's like when I say, I'm a good chess player. What I really mean is, I'm a better chess player than a lot of other people I've played chess against who are mostly my children.

Right? Right? But is that good enough? Is that good enough? You know, you can kind of imagine two swimmers on the shore of California with a dream of reaching Hawaii, of getting to Hawaii, of visiting Hawaii one day.

Right? You know, one is sort of an average swimmer. The other is an Olympic level athlete. And if they both hit the water and start swimming, right, I mean, how many miles does the average swimmer go?

Right? Like a mile? Two miles maybe? Three? Four? Four? But then they sink. But the Olympic swimmer hits the water and they go maybe five or ten times that distance, right?

[14:59] Like clearly the Olympic swimmer is good. In fact, they're great. But what's the goal? Which one of the swimmers made it to Hawaii? Neither of them.

Neither was even close. In fact, from that perspective, right, those two swimmers weren't actually all that different. One went five miles, the other went 50, but there's still like 2,400 miles left for both of them.

So which one was better on that perspective? You see, when the books of your life are opened before God, it might be better than your neighbor, but that final day will not be a day of comparison. You won't be judged on the basis of what someone else did or didn't do, but according to what you have done. Verse 13 says, they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done.

And when you start turning the pages of your life before God, how will you fare? Did you love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength?

[16:19] Did you love your neighbor as yourself? But that's an impossibly high standard, you say. Who could meet that? But it is a just standard, isn't it?

Isn't that a just standard? I mean, if God is God, He deserves our total affection. If our neighbors are created in God's image, they deserve our love as much as we love ourselves.

But just for the sake of example, well, let's lower the bar, right? Did you do that 75% of the time? Probably not.

Did you live that way 50% of the time? Meh. 10%. 1%? And for whose sake did you do those things even at the lowest level?

Was it for God's glory? Or was it also for your own? Did you gladly submit to God's rule in your life, treating your very existence as a gift from Him, which it is, to be joyfully lived according to His will, which it should, or did you run your life your own way and treat God as a nice idea but not really the center of your life?

[17:50] Turn the pages of your life. Open the books. Can you really say that you've given God what He deserves with your life? Have you returned to God even a fraction of what He deserves as your creator and sustainer?

Have you treated Him with even the modicum of respect and honor and love He deserves as the infinitely worthy and holy and beautiful one? No.

No one has. Not you. Not me. Instead, we dream of big careers and easy retirements and making a mark and yes, at times we dream of doing good and leaving the world a better place but God?

He's not really part of the equation, is He? He's like a footnote on a couple of pages of the books of our life. In fact, most of the time, God just gets in the way. So we ignore Him and we push Him to the margin.

We give Him lip service and we get on with our lives. And so what do our lives deserve? What do we deserve before the only judgment seat that really matters?

[19:13] The truth is, we, all of us, live our lives wanting to be independent, wanting to run our lives without God and so, at the final judgment, God will render a completely fair and just verdict.

He will look at our lives and say, you've chosen to live your life without me, on your own, as your own king, as your own queen, so this is my verdict. Thy will be done.

And God will give us what our lives have in essence truly asked for every waking moment, separation from Him forever.

We wanted a life without God and God in His justice will give it to us. But what does eternal separation from God mean?

Well, in Matthew chapter 25, Jesus tells three parables about what that final reality entails. We actually read one of those parables from Matthew chapter 25 earlier in the service.

[20:31] And these metaphors that Jesus uses describe something that is unimaginably terrible. In fact, Jesus Himself talked more about this reality than anyone else in the Bible.

So, even if you don't believe that Jesus was the Son of God, if you at least think that Jesus was a great spiritual teacher, you have to consider what He says about this. And the metaphors that He uses to describe this eternal separation from God are exclusion and darkness and fire.

Exclusion, it's like being cut off from a feast, Jesus says, and left alone. And after all, if God is the source of joy and love, which He is, the eternal separation from Him must mean the absence of those things.

So, what's left then? Bitterness, regret, anger, gnawing, loneliness? darkness? And then Jesus says, it's like darkness.

After all, if God is the source of all light and truth, what must eternal separation from Him mean but the cold reality of darkness and fear and deception?

[22:07] And finally, Jesus says, it's like fire. Of course, fire is not just painful. It's not, fire is not just an image of suffering but fire also disintegrates, doesn't it?

It turns everything it touches to ash. And after all, if God is the source of our wholeness and our safety and our peace, then to be separated from God must mean the eternal anguish of seeing our lives amount to nothing but ash.

And you know, the greatest terror of all is that this outcome of divine justice, this separation from God will be without end and without repentance.

We've all experienced exclusion and darkness and even fire in this life. But it's been temporary, right? Eventually, there's a stay. Eventually, there's a reprieve.

But when the books are opened and God renders his judgment, when the final thy will be done is issued, it will be forever. And what's more, in every picture that the New Testament gives of this eternal state of separation from God, we see this.

[23 : 36] in that final state, no one repents. No one admits they've done wrong. No one asks God for forgiveness and release.

Instead, it's only a perpetual hardening of heart as our earthly trajectory of self-justifying, self-centeredness just continues forever.

forever. It's like a coin that's dropped in a bottomless well and it just keeps falling and never rises. this outcome of divine judgment is what Jesus calls hell and what John calls here the lake of fire. And like so much else in Revelation, the image of a lake of fire may be symbolic, but if it is a metaphor, don't you see?

It's a metaphor for something infinitely worse. The just wrath of a holy God poured out on those who have rejected him.

[24 : 55] Now when we think about eternal separation from God, we sometimes think that, man, the punishment doesn't seem to fit the crime. I mean, how could my 60, 70, 80 years on earth deserve eternal separation?

But the reality is to sin against an infinite God creates an infinite offense with an infinite debt to be paid.

When the books of our life are opened, how many offenses will we read there? how many times have we disregarded and disobeyed this infinitely good and holy and beautiful God?

How many infinities have we piled up in our short span of life? the cost of our sin is mathematically impossible to grasp.

So what is it that we need to be saved from? Well, we need to be saved from the books of our own life, from the record that we've written.

[26 : 14] the reality of this final judgment, it's our only hope that our lives have any meaning at all, but what we find is that the books we bring, the record that we arrive with, they write our own condemnation.

So what do we do? Where do we go? Well, maybe we think, I'll start writing some new chapters, right?

I'll turn over a new leaf, I'll be a good person, I'll arrive with a better book, but friend, it won't work. Sin is too great.

Maybe you'll swim, maybe you'll swim an extra 10 or 20 miles offshore, but you won't reach the destination. you'll still sink. And even those extra chapters that you've written, won't they just be another testament to your desire to try to live life independently of God, to try to write a righteous record of your own, to do it your own way so you don't have to submit to God's righteousness.

You arrive with just another testament to your self-justifying project to be your own Savior and Lord. So what do we do?

[27 : 44] How can we be saved from the books that we bring to the judgment? Well, this brings us to our last point. We see in this text not just the reality and the outcome of divine judgment, but we also see our only hope in the face of judgment.

You see, in John's vision, the books of our lives are opened and they render us condemned, but there's another book. There's another book that's brought forth what John calls here the book of life. And those whose names are written in the book of life are rescued from the judgment that their own lives deserve. And what is this book of life?

Elsewhere in Revelation, it's called the Lamb's book of life or in another place, the book of life that belongs to the Lamb who was slain. And if your name is written in that book, then you do not need to receive the judgment your books deserve.

If your name is written in that book, you won't receive the judgment your books deserve. Why? How could that be? Because for every name that's written in the Lamb's book of life, their judgment has already been paid.

[29 : 19] Their sentence has already been served. It's a record of everyone whose judgment has been paid. But how could that be?

Think of it this way. Here's the book of your life, right? Not the Bible. I'm just using it as an example, right? Think of this as, this is the record of your life, right?

Well, it's books in Revelation, so there should be two of them, okay? Here are the books. You've brought them, right? This is all your thoughts, all your words, all your deeds, all your sins, all your failures, oh wait, all your secrets that no one but God knows, okay, they're all here.

But God saw you. He saw you carrying that record. He knows the weight and He knows the guilt and the shame.

And in love, He came in the person of His Son, Jesus. Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, became human and lived a life of complete obedience to the Father.

[30 : 31] Jesus actually did love God with all His heart and soul and mind and strength. Jesus actually did love His neighbor as Himself. His record was flawless. But His mission wasn't just to live the life that humans should have lived.

His mission was also to come and to die, to be the Lamb who was slain. So you see, on the cross, Jesus wasn't just laying down His life for His own sins.

He didn't have any, right? Like, there's no record of wrong in Jesus' life. He was laying down His life for your sins. At the cross, your record, your books, were laid on Him.

So what's left for you? You see, on the cross, Jesus was willing to undergo the exclusion and the darkness and the fire of separation from the Father.

Jesus descended into hell on the cross to pay the full judgment of sin for everyone who repents and trusts in Him. And because He is the eternal Son, the infinite God incarnate, He can actually pay an infinite cost.

[31 : 47] So do you see how much He loves you? You know, we often think about hell and we ask, how could God be a loving God if hell is real?

But don't you see, hell actually shows us the utter depths of God's love for us. He was willing to pay even that price to win you and rescue you and save you from your own record.

heart. Jesus endured hell for you so you can face the final judgment and live. This is how we're saved, by trusting in the One who bore our sins on the cross and who was raised from the dead three days later to demonstrate that the sacrifice was complete, that the penalty was paid in full, and that all who trust in Him receive the full forgiveness of sins and resurrection life so that your name could be written in another book.

So the choice before us is this, will you arrive at the final judgment trusting in your own books or trusting in Christ?

And if you have trusted in Him, then your name is written in His book of life and no one can blot it out, no one can erase it, it's there permanently and forever.

[33 : 26] forever. You didn't deserve to have your name written in there, so there's nothing you can do to deserve having taken it out. So Christians, do you realize what this means?

Do you realize what it means that your name is written in the book of life? First, it means that you have a ground for rejoicing. You have a reason for rejoicing like nothing else.

It's very interesting, in one point in Jesus' ministry, the disciples come back to Jesus after a super successful ministry tour. They've preached and people believed, they've cast out demons and they've fled, and the disciples come back and they're ecstatic.

And Jesus says, I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. In other words, He's like, good job. But then Jesus says this, He says, nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.

To know that your name is in His book written in heaven, that you're known and loved by the King of the universe, free from condemnation, free for eternal life, that will give you joy like nothing else.

[34 : 43] It's a joy that your failures can't touch and it's a joy that your successes can't even compete with. Jesus looked at them and said, you had a great day. Don't even rejoice in that. There's something even better.

Your name's written in heaven. But if your name is in His book, if your name is in His book, it's not just a ground for rejoicing, but it also means that your books take on a new meaning.

If your name is written in the book of life, then your books, the books of your life, start to take on a new meaning. You know, it might be tempting to think, well, look, if I'm not saved by my works, then my works must not mean anything, right?

And the truth is, your works will never justify you. They will never save you. But for those who trust in Christ, God says, I've prepared good works in advance for you to do. You'll see the hungry and you'll feed them. you'll see the naked and clothe them. You'll see the sick and imprisoned and you'll go visit them. You will become a force of love that the world doesn't understand.

[36 : 01] Only those who know the freedom of having their names written in heaven can love freely. Because it's those who know mercy that show mercy.

And that means that there's this new thread, there's this new literary motif that starts to weave its way through your books. It's this thread of grace. It's a thread of God's glory.

It's a thread of the Holy Spirit making you more and more like Christ. Because now your story isn't about you anymore. Suddenly, the books you bring to the judgment, they're not about you.

They're not about how far you can swim. They're about Christ. The hero of your story isn't you anymore. It's the Lord Jesus.

And that's what baptism says. In a beautiful and symbolic way, it says, my life is about Christ now.

So for those of you who are getting baptized over these next two Sundays, let me say this to you, when you go down into the water and come back up again, you're saying that your life from now on is about Him.

[37 : 18] Jesus united Himself to you in the incarnation, taking the judgment you deserve and rising again. In other words, He went down and came back up. And now, through faith, you've united yourself to Him.

Your old life has gone down and your new life has risen up. He's the hero of your books now. But remember what Jesus says, because some days will be good and some days will be full of trials and doubts.

But remember that you have a joy now that outstrips even your best days. Rejoice in this, Jesus says, that your names are written in heaven.

In other words, keep eternity in view. The King has gone through the eternal fire for you. He's engraved you on the palms of His hands and in His grip He'll never let you go.

Your name will never, ever be erased from His book. And that's true of everyone who's put their trust in Christ. So live with that in view.

[38 : 27] Live with the freedom and the joy and the perseverance that that brings. And friend, if you haven't put your life into the arms of Christ, what do you wait for?

Christ has done everything to save you from the eternal consequences of your sin and to save you for a life of joy and purpose now and without end.

It doesn't matter how thick or thin your books might be. It doesn't matter how young or old you are. It doesn't matter how dark or shameful your pages may be.

Jesus said, the one who comes to me, I'll never cast them out. Never. So come to Him. Let's pray together.

As we bow before God, let's take a moment of silence before God.

[39 : 34] We've considered some weighty things today. Things that our minds often push to the margins of our hurried lives. But right now, we have the opportunity to consider the most important question a human could ever ask, where do I stand with God?

Some of us have been attending services and hearing the things about Christ and the gospel and some of us are maybe realizing for the first time that it is time.

It's time to lay down your books and give yourself to Christ. If the Holy Spirit is convicting you in that way, you might even pray something simple in your own heart like this.

Father, I realize that in my own deeds, I don't deserve to be called your child. In fact, I deserve eternity apart from you. But I trust in what Christ has done, dying for my sins.

So I turn from my sins and my efforts to save myself and I take you, Jesus, as my Lord. I commit my life to you and thank you for receiving me, forgiving me, and making me your child.

[41 : 01] Fill me with your Spirit and let me live all my days in the assurance that my name is now written in your book of life.

Father, we also pray for those who have turned to you and are getting baptized over these next two Sundays. We pray for Jack today. Next week, we pray for Dawn, for Sherry, for Stacy, for Mandy.

Fill them with your Spirit as they make this public profession of faith. Fan into flame the good work that you've begun in them. Let their lives be lived for your glory.

And would all who've placed their faith in Christ rejoice that our names are written in heaven. And would we be eager to share this joy, this good news of the gospel. Use our church, Lord, for the glory of your name. and for the advance of your gospel among all nations. Amen.