

# The Final Judgment

**Revelation 20:10** And the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

<sup>11</sup> Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them.

<sup>12</sup> And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done.

<sup>13</sup> And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done.

<sup>14</sup> Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire.

<sup>15</sup> And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

**Rev 21:1** Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

(Rev 20:10-15)

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*But when everything is already dusty ashes,  
and God puts to sleep the unspeakable fire, even as he kindled it,  
God himself will again fashion the bones and ashes of men  
and he will raise up mortals again as they were before.  
And then there will be a judgment over which God himself will preside,  
judging the world again. As many as sinned by impiety,  
these will a mound of earth cover,  
and broad Tartarus and the repulsive recesses of Gehenna.  
But as many as are pious, they will live on earth again  
when God gives spirit and life and favor  
to these pious ones. Then they will all see themselves  
beholding the delightful and pleasant light of the sun.  
Oh most blessed, whatever man will live to that time.*  
(Sibylline Oracle 4.179-92)

## God in the Dock

In one of his better-known essays (written 9-1-1948),<sup>1</sup> **C. S. Lewis** makes the observation regarding modern man that there is “**the almost total absence from the mind ... of any sense of sin.**” It didn’t matter who his audience was, whether public or private. And this was **well over 70 years ago**, when the Western World still at least had the hangover headache from the Christian culture that it was trying so furiously to alleviate from its skull. How much truer is this

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<sup>1</sup> I found a handy spreadsheet that lists all of Lewis’ works in chronological order here: **Jeff Wofford**, “A Chronological Reading Guide to the Works of C. S. Lewis,” *Holy Ghost Stories* (Nov 8, 2013), <https://www.jeffwofford.com/?p=1526> and <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1GEIFVzA0BFv7NHhA0zKXx5dsa4kSeSc58N0nNWI TBEo/edit#gid=1569006452>.

observation in our now thoroughly postmodern, relativistic, tyrannical, woke, fluid, trans-everything world that has arisen from the abyss to take its place?

At any rate, he goes on to remark that, “The early Christian preachers could assume in their hearers, whether Jews, *Metuentes* [God-fearers], or Pagans, a sense of guilt. (That this was common among Pagans is shown by the fact that both Epicureanism and the Mystery Religions both claimed, though in different ways, to assuage it.) Thus the Christian message was in those days unmistakably the *Evangelium*, the Good News. It promised healing to those who knew they were sick.” On the other hand, “We have to convince our hearers of the unwelcome diagnosis before we can expect them to welcome the news of the remedy.”

This is made quite difficult because modern humanity has now taken the exact opposite stand regarding deity than ancients did. “The ancient man approached God (or even the gods) as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man the roles are reversed. He is the judge: God is in the dock. He is quite a kindly judge: if God should have a reasonable defence for being the god who permits war, poverty and disease, he is ready to listen to it. The trial may

even end in God's acquittal. But the important thing is that Man is on the Bench and God in the Dock."<sup>2</sup>

To what does this expression, "God in the dock" refer? A dock is a rather archaic word, at least to Americans, that refers to something found in American courtrooms as late as the 1970s. In the British Commonwealth, where Lewis resided, a courtroom that tries criminal cases usually has a dock—a *space reserved exclusively for seating a criminal defendant*. In other words, if God is in the dock, it means that he is on trial. Meanwhile, we in our arrogance and hubris sit aloft, front and center, wigs fitted neatly on top of our heads, robes draped around our bodies, collars fixed tightly around our necks, gavel upraised in our hands at the Judge's Bench.

To such a person, the very idea of a final judgment, let alone the rewards and punishments and places reserved, are more than nonsensical. They are laughable and comical. It's absurd. There can be no such thing, for any kind of deity who might lay claim to presiding over such an event must first come, hands cuffed and led downward, below us and off to the side, to the dock in our own court of personal opinions and judgments.

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<sup>2</sup> C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*, ed. Walter Hooper (HarperOne, 1994), 267-68.

# The Final Judgment: Context and Structure

This will be our **fifth and final week** in this mini-series on Revelation 20. Today, we look at what for modern and postmodern man might just be the laughable or absurd idea of **Final Judgment**. However, for the reader of Revelation, for the student of Scripture, even for one who understands that there is evil and that it is wrong for evil to go unpunished, but especially for the one who truly knows himself to be the creation rather than the Creator, fallen in sin, unable to extricate himself from his own ultimately suicidal end, it comes as the climatic, necessary, final, only rational conclusion not only for the devil and his angels, but for all that is evil in this world.

I've chosen **vv. 10-15** because here we have many related topics: the final **end of the devil**, including his unending eternal **torment**; the Great White **Throne Judgment**; earth and sky fleeing away; **all the dead** standing before God's throne; open **books**; the final **destinations** of every man, woman, and child "**according to what they had done**," and **the lake of fire**.

Structurally speaking, it seems that **20:11-21:1** form the most basic unit of thought, with **21:1** bringing both the

ending **inclusio** of earth and heaven, as well as starting the new section of glorious **hope** and eternal joy. Several have seen this (for example centering on everyone being judged and/or why it is happening):

- A. And I saw: **Earth and heaven** flee from the throne, 20:11
- B. **Dead** stand before throne, 20:12a
- C. **Books** opened, 20:12b
- D. Dead judged according to things written, their deeds, 20:12c**
- B'. Sea, death, Hades give up **dead**, 20:13a
- D'. Dead judged according to their deeds, 20:13b–14**
- C'. Names not in **book**, thrown into the lake of fire, 20:15
- A'. And I saw: New **heaven** and new **earth**, 21:1<sup>3</sup>

Or,

- A And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face **THE EARTH** (20:11)
- B and **THE HEAVEN** fled away; and there was found no place for them. (11)
- C And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the **book OF LIFE**: and the dead were judged out of those things which were **written** in the books, according to their works. (12)
- D And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and **DEATH AND HELL** delivered up the dead which were in them: (13)
- E and they were judged every man according to their works. (13)**
- D' And **DEATH AND HELL** were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. (14)
- C' And whosoever was not found **written** in the **book OF LIFE** was cast into the lake of fire. (15)
- B' And I saw a new **HEAVEN** (1)
- A' and a new **EARTH**: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. (1)<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> **Peter J. Leithart**, *Revelation*, ed. Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, vol. 2, The International Theological Commentary on the Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testaments (London; Oxford; New York; New Delhi; Sydney: Bloomsbury; Bloomsbury T&T Clark: An Imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2018), 300–301.

<sup>4</sup> **Nigel**, “Revelation 20:11-21:1,” *Biblical Chiasm Exchange* (Dec 21, 2016), <https://www.chiasmusxchange.com/2016/12/21/revelation-2011-211/>.

Looking at vv. 10-15 will therefore confine us to thinking about the topic of future *damnation*, whereas once we move into ch. 21, we will have much more to say about *everlasting life*. Along these lines there is a direct tie-in with our passage going all the way back to vs. 6 with “the second death.” It is this “second death” that will be the first thing I want to look at today, as it is the 17<sup>th</sup> and final question I originally asked of the first six verses of the chapter:

**1a)** Rev 20:6, Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years;

**1b)** Rev 20:7-10, Satan will be released to deceive the nations/ cast into the lake of fire;

**1c)** Rev 20:11, Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away/ There was found no place for them;

**1d)** Rev 20:12a, And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God;

**1e)** Rev 20:12b, And books were opened/ Another book was opened, which is the Book of Life;

**central axis)** Rev 20:12c, And the dead were judged according to their works;

**2e)** Rev 20:12d, By the things which were written in the books;

**2d)** Rev 20:13a, The sea gave up the dead who were in it/ Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them;

**2c)** Rev 20:13b, And they were judged, each one according to his works;

**2b)** Rev 20:14a, Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire;

**2a)** Rev 20:14b-15, This is the second death/ Anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.<sup>5</sup>

I also want to note, just to continue impressing upon you the repeating, cyclical nature of Revelation 19-20 and

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<sup>5</sup> Christine Smith, “Revelation 20,” *A Little Perspective* (Dec 27, 2016), <https://www.alittleperspective.com/revelation-20-2016/>.

that they talk about the same thing, how our passage today has a parallel in that seemingly out-of-place section of Christ appearing on the white horse in the middle of the two suppers in the middle of ch. 19 (see B B’):

A Chiasm I-Rev 19:1-10 Announcement of the Inauguration of the Marriage Supper [Old Earth]

B Chiasm II-Rev 19:11-16 Appearance of Christ to Judge and Fight the Wicked [Heaven (Sky)]

C Chiasm III-Rev 19:17-21 Defeat of Those Who War Against God [Earth]

**D Chiasm IV-Rev 20: 1-7 Reign of Christ and His Saints and Binding of Satan [Abyss/Heaven/Abyss]**

C' Chiasm V-Rev 20:8-10 Defeat of Those Who War Against God [Earth]

B' Chiasm VI-Rev 20: 11-15 Appearance of God to Judge the Wicked [Heaven (Sky)]

A' Chiasm W-Rev 21:1-8 Recreation of Earth and Consummation of Marriage [New Earth]<sup>6</sup>

## “What is the Second Death?” –Exegesis: Revelation 20:10-15

The last of our seventeen questions arose at the end of vs. 6. “Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power...” What is the “second death?” There is an adage I learned in Sunday School. If you are born once, you will die twice; if you are born twice, you will die once. The idea of being

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<sup>6</sup> This is my own modification of the chiasm of Ed Christian, who unhelpfully labels these sections are “pre-“ and “post” millennial. While they can be read that way, they also need not be read that way. My modification simply leaves the millennial question out of the chiasm. See Ed Christian, “A Chiasm of Seven Chiasm: The Structure of the Millennial Vision, Rev 19:1-21:8,” AUSS 37.2 (Autumn 1999): 210. <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2553&context=auss>.

born twice takes us another part of the inverse parallel that is now quite early in John's Gospel.

Jesus told Nicodemus the Pharisees, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). Like virtually everyone in this Gospel, the Teacher of Israel (10) took Jesus literally. “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?” (4). But Jesus was not talking about something truly absurd like somehow going back into your mother's womb. He was talking about *spiritual* birth. Scripture teaches, “You were *dead* in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked” (Eph 2:1). He is not talking about physical death here, but *spiritual* death. This is not talking about a second death, either before or after physical death, because this is a state or condition that we are all born into. The spirit must be made alive out of this dead state. Behold! Just a few verses later (again, as we saw last time), “Even when we were dead in our trespasses, [God] *made us alive* together with Christ—by grace you have been saved” (5). So this spiritual birth is equal to *salvation* or regeneration or even, to put it in Revelation's terms, *resurrection*. Not a resurrection of the body, which comes

later, but a resurrection of the spirit. This, I argued last time, is the first resurrection.

This spiritual resurrection is a kind of death to the world. “If with Christ you died to the *stoichiea* [elemental spirits of the world], as if you were still alive to the world...” (Col 2:20). Because it is spiritual and therefore invisible, it is a kind of death and new life that is difficult even for a man himself to always understand rightly. So the Apostle reminds us, “You also must *consider yourselves* dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Rom 6:11). And Peter tells us, “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit” (1Pe 3:18). Only by doing this can you properly fight the spiritual battle.

But dying to the world is also not the second death. For, it is to these people, made alive in the spirit—born again by the Spirit—that John tells them that they will not need worry about the second death. In fact, Jesus had told the churches this very thing in the chiastic parallel in Revelation 2, the *only other time* “second death” appears in the book (or the Bible).<sup>7</sup> “The one who conquers will not be hurt by

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<sup>7</sup> We do find it in TargNeofiti Dt 33:6; TargIsa 22:14; 65:6, 15. “May Reuben live *in this world*, and not die *in the second (death) in which the wicked die in the world to come*; and may his young men

the second death” (2:11). Yes, they will die physically, and the book strongly suggests that many of his people will do this as actual martyrs, but we will not need to worry about the second death. So again, what is this “second death?”

The phrase appears again in Rev 20:14, “This is the second death...” It then immediately defines for us what that second death is: “*The lake of fire.*” The lake of fire is therefore the second death. “Lake of fire” is a phrase found only in Revelation. The first time it appears is in 19:20. “And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet ... These two were thrown alive into *the lake of fire* that burns with sulfur.” Here we can comment on two points. First, it is two supernatural creatures that are thrown into it. Second, it burns with sulfur.

These two points exactly match what we find in Rev 20:10, at the beginning of our passage today. After the great Last Battle that in effect is no battle at all, “The devil who had deceived them [that is, his great army composed here of

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*be a people of warriors in number*” (Deut 33:6 TgNeofiti). “With my ears *I was hearing when this was decreed before the LORD God of hosts: ‘Surely this sin will not be forgiven you until you die the second death,’* says the LORD God of hosts” (TgIsa 22.14). “*Their Punishment shall be in Gehenna where the fire burns all the day. Behold, it is written before me: ‘I will not give them respite while they live, but theirs is the retribution of their sins; I will hand over their bodies to the second death’ ... You shall leave your name to my chosen for an oath, and the LORD God will slay you with the second death; but his servants, the righteous, he will call by a different name*” (TgIsa 65:6, 15).

its human component], was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur.” Again, a supernatural creature is thrown into this lake and again it burns with sulfur. So what is the lake of fire? Again, it is a phrase found only here in the Bible. But that doesn’t mean it was unheard of prior to Revelation.

Virtually all the Bible Dictionaries point out that the image of sulfur has its origins in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Recall that this place was well watered, like the Garden of God (Gen 13:10). Everyone wanted to live here in what is now a desolate wasteland near the Dead Sea. But it was not so dead back then. Several great cities sprang up around it, and Lot, the nephew of Abraham, chose this as his home. But something terrible was going on in Sodom. In fact, many terrible things were taking place here, including adultery, lying, strengthening the hands of evildoers (Jer 23:14); oppressing the poor (Amos 4:1-22); pride, gluttony, idleness (Ezek 16:49-50), inhospitality, homosexuality, and even sexually sinning with angels (Gen 19:1ff). Because their sin was so great, it reached up to heaven itself. There, God decided to punish the cities with an *everlasting destruction* that continues to this day. In one of the great verses of the Old Testament for how it clearly shows us God the Father and God the Son we read, “Then the LORD rained down

on Sodom and Gomorrah *sulfur and fire* from the LORD out of heaven” (Gen 19:24). One Yahweh on earth, there with Lot. The other Yahweh in heaven: Son, Father. Curiously, God does all this right next to the great Dead Sea ... a lake where nothing now lives.

To this we could add the Gog-Magog battle, which also has something similar. “With pestilence and bloodshed I will enter into judgment with him, and I will rain upon him and his hordes and the many peoples who are with him torrential rains and hailstones, fire and sulfur” (Ezek 38:22). This is curious, because the Devil is thrown into this lake of fire immediately after the Gog-Magog battle. Torrential rains of fire here could, like the now Dead Sea, get you to an image of a lake of fire and sulfur.

The lake of fire also has some affinity with the OT, particularly Isa 30:33 and Dan 7:10. Isaiah talks about God’s breath being like “a stream of sulfur” that kindles the fires of judgment. Daniel’s “river of fire” surrounds the throne of God. This is an especially important connection because it tells us that the beast that came out of the sea was killed and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire (11). Was it thrown into the river? Intertestamental books, especially 1 Enoch, play around with the idea of a lake of fire

with streams and rivers of fire and abysses of fire (esp. **1En 18:11-16; 21:7-10; 90:24-27**; etc.), and so on. We also have similar conceptions with **Greek** (Hades, Tartarus, Styx and other rivers), **Scandinavian** (Muspelheim),<sup>8</sup> **Babylonian** (Bitter River),<sup>9</sup> and **Egyptian** (Lake of Fire)<sup>10</sup> thought.

But it is really the biblical place known as **Gehenna** that we find the best parallel. Here we need to understand something about Greek terms and the English translations of them in most of our Bibles. While the “lake of fire” is an actual translation of the Greek *limnē tou pyros*, most translations do not explain to you that there are actually **three different terms** that are all translated as “hell” in our NTs.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> “Muspelheim,” V.K.N.G. <https://blog.vkngjewelry.com/en/muspelheim/>.

<sup>9</sup> On the Bitter River and the Greek Rivers especially with Enoch see **Kelley Coblentz Bautch**, *A Study of the Geography of 1 Enoch 17-19 ‘No One Has Seen What I Have Seen.’* Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 81. Ed. John J. Collins. Boston: Brill, 2003), 84-85.

<sup>10</sup> On the Egyptian Lake of Fire see Book of the Dead 17:40f; 71:18; 110:19 and the references in **G. A. Lee**, “Lake of Fire,” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised*, ed. Geoffrey W Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979–1988), 61. Also **David E. Aune**, *Revelation 17–22*, vol. 52C, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 1092.

<sup>11</sup> I consulted several studies of these places for this sermon. See **Kim Gary Papaioannou**, “Places of Punishment in the Synoptic Gospels,” PhD Thesis to Durham University (2004), <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/6116592.pdf>; **Hanré Janse van Rensburg** & Ernest van Eck, “Hell Revisited: A Socio-Critical Enquiry into the Roots and Relevance of Hell for the Church Today,” *HTS Teologiese Studies* 64.3 (Jan 2009): 1499-1525, [file:///Users/douglasvandorn/Downloads/Hell\\_revisited\\_A\\_socio-critical\\_enquiry\\_into\\_the\\_roots\\_and\\_relevance\\_of\\_hell\\_for\\_the\\_church\\_today.pdf](file:///Users/douglasvandorn/Downloads/Hell_revisited_A_socio-critical_enquiry_into_the_roots_and_relevance_of_hell_for_the_church_today.pdf); **Kara Harris**, “What in Hell Conflicts with God? The Divine Promulgation View of Hell Confirms the Reality of Hell Does Not Make God a Moral Monster,” MA Thesis to Liberty University School of Divinity (2020), <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1714&context=masters>; **Brian**

The first term is *hades*. Hades is actually translated as such in our passage, for which I'm thankful. "Death and Hades gave up the dead... Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire" (Rev 20:13-14). But sometimes, *hades* is simply rendered as "hell." For example, "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it" is actually the word *hades*.<sup>12</sup> Hades appears scores of times in the LXX, where it always translates the word Sheol—the realm of the dead. In the OT, everyone goes to Sheol; therefore everyone goes to Hades. Believers, unbelievers, Jews, Gentiles ... all go to Hades when they die. Therefore, Hades is described as "down" (Mt 11:23), but also as having gates (16:18), a place of torment and fire (Luke 16:23), a place of abandonment (Acts 2:27), and the place of Death (Rev 1:18).

Now, I do not believe they all went to the same *part* of Hades. Picture Hades as a huge country with many regions and cities. I think the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus can

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Godawa, *Psalm 82: The Divine Council of the Gods, the Judgment of the Watchers & the Inheritance of the Nations* (Los Angeles, CA: Embedded Pictures Publishing, 2018), ch. 3; Phillip G. Kayser, "The Last Rebellion: Revelation 20:7-10," *Biblical Blueprints* (8-26-2018); [https://kaysercommentary.com/Sermons/New%20Testament/Revelation/Revelation%2020/Revelation%2020\\_7-10.md#fnref7](https://kaysercommentary.com/Sermons/New%20Testament/Revelation/Revelation%2020/Revelation%2020_7-10.md#fnref7); Edward William Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*, Third Edition (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011); and several dictionaries.

<sup>12</sup> Curiously, this is the only time that ESV translates it as hell in the NT. The other nine occurrences it transliterates it as Hades. The KJV on the other hand always renders it as "hell."

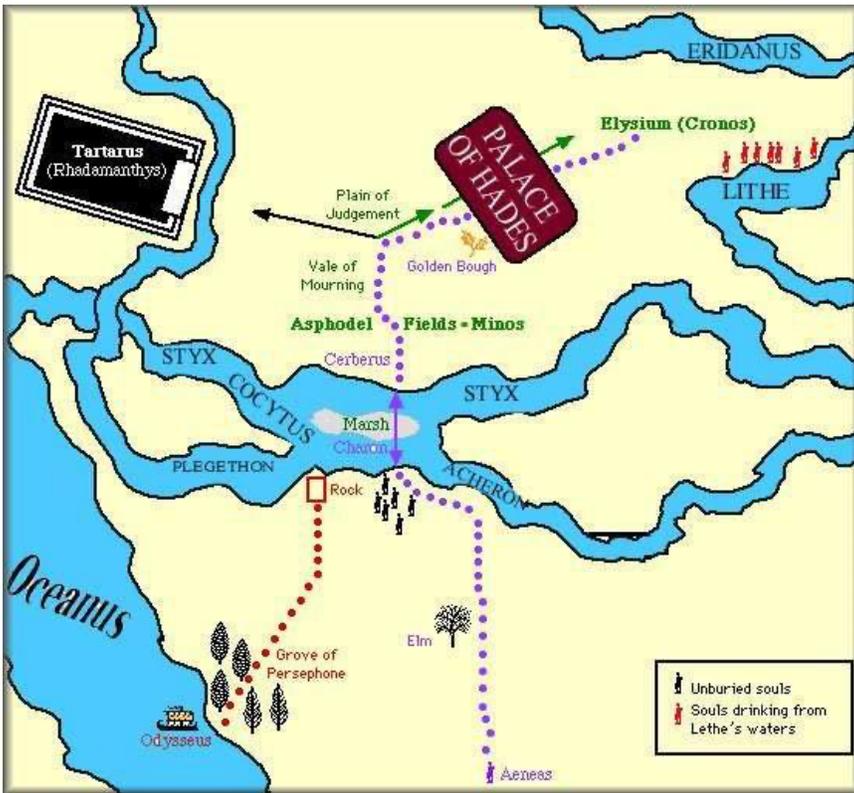
help. This story told in Luke 16 is technically not a parable,<sup>13</sup> though it does function in some ways as one. Whether it is real history or not (I tend to think why not? see note), it is giving us a real depiction of Hades.<sup>14</sup> We have the rich man tormented in a place of burning and Lazarus in a place of peace known as Abraham's Bosom. They are divided by a great chasm. In some ways this parallels the Greek conception of Hades, where you have various rivers that divide the place up between the Elysium Fields of blissful sleep and the horrific prison known as Tartarus.

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<sup>13</sup> Following Ambrose and Tertullian (*On the Soul* 7). Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to S. Luke*, International Critical Commentary (London: T&T Clark International, 1896), 391.

**Going Deeper:** The most detailed study of this story concurs saying, "Strictly speaking, Dives and Lazarus is not a parable." Matthew Ryan Hauge, *The Biblical Tour of Hell*, Library of New Testament Studies 485 (New York: T&T Clark, 2013), 33. Hauge, however, disagrees with these Fathers that it is a real story, instead opting for something like a mythical (do not read "fake" here) Tour of the Underworld, ala Homer's Odysseus going into Hades. Many have noticed the unmistakable parallels with these kinds of stories, not merely from Greece, but other ancient cultures. To me, the issue not really a matter of it is an historical episode involving Lazarus, Abraham, and this rich man, though I do find the name "Lazarus" very peculiar given that Jesus' friend literally died, could have experienced this, and then told everyone when Jesus raised him from the dead. The issue is whether Jesus is giving us a real portrait of the underworld. Thomas Simmons puts my position well, "This is not a parable, but no matter if it were. The Son of God did not resort to misrepresentation even in parables. All of His parables are true to facts." Thomas Paul Simmons, *A Systematic Study of Bible Doctrine: A Logical Arrangement and a Diligent Treatment of the Teachings of God's Holy Word, Systematic, Calvinistic, Baptist, Premillennial*, Third English Edition (Russell, KY: The Baptist Examiner, 1955), 426.

<sup>14</sup> As opposed to Papaioannou, who sees Jesus basically subverting everything wrong with the pagan view.



Tartarus is a second word translated as “hell” in English Bibles. For example, “For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into *hell* and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment” (2Pe 2:4). Peter uses this word in exactly the same way that the Greek myths do—of the Titans who were locked up in Tartarus in the parallel of the Genesis 6 story (Hesiod, *Theogony* 713-20).<sup>15</sup> Tartarus is not Hades, but is technically

<sup>15</sup> The Greeks said that only gods were sent to Tartarus. Jews and the Bible seem to concur with the Greeks. Peter has only angels going here. Enoch has the fallen Watchers being sent here by the archangel Uriel (curiously: “Fire of God”). Enoch says, “He was angry with them and he bound them until the appointed time of their completion of their sin, thousands of years” (1En 18:16; see 1En 9:4). Where were they bound? “I saw a great chasm (*chasma mega*) in reference to the descending pillars of fire and it was not measured neither with respect to depth nor with respect to height” (1En 18:11). *Chasma meg* is the exact way that Tartarus is described by Hesiod (*Theogony* 740). Also, the Sibylline Oracle says, “Then Uriel, the great angel, will break the

in Hades. It is a part of Hades, deep and dark and gloomy. It is a **prison** that not even the most powerful of watchers can escape. Since it is not identical with Hades, it is unfortunate that the Bible translates both words as “hell.”

A third word translated “hell” in English NTs is **Gehenna**. This word appears about as often as Hades, but is not found in Revelation. It is described as a place of **unquenchable** (**Mark 9:43**) **fire** (**Matt 5:22**), where the **worm** **does not die** (**Mark 9:48**), where body and soul are “**destroyed**” (**Matt 10:28**), There is a fable that Gehenna was named after a **garbage dump** outside of Jerusalem. There is zero evidence that there was ever a garbage dump outside of the City that burned such that it became an illustration of hell.<sup>16</sup> However, the truth is much more interesting and disturbing. In the **Valley of Hinnom**, just outside of Jerusalem, Molech was worshiped by kings like Ahaz (**2Kg 16:3**) and Manasseh (**2Kg 21:6**). Here, they would sacrifice

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gigantic bolts, of unyielding and unbreakable steel, of the gates of Hades, not forged of metal; he will throw them wide open and will lead all the mournful forms to judgment, especially those of ancient phantoms, Titans and the Giants and such as the Flood destroyed” (**SibOr 2.228-232**).

<sup>16</sup> **Todd Bolen**, “The Myth of the Burning Garbage Dump of Gehenna,” *BiblePlaces.com* (April 7, 2011). [https://www.bibleplaces.com/2011/04/myth-of-burning-garbage-dump-of-gehenna/?utm\\_source=feedburner&utm\\_medium=feed&utm\\_campaign=Feed%3A%20BiblePlacesBlog%20%28BiblePlaces%20Blog%29](https://www.bibleplaces.com/2011/04/myth-of-burning-garbage-dump-of-gehenna/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A%20BiblePlacesBlog%20%28BiblePlaces%20Blog%29). Todd’s post is no longer online that I can find. He has a follow-up here: <https://www.bibleplaces.com/blog/2011/04/fires-of-gehenna-views-of-scholars/>.

their own children to this evil entity (2Kg 23:10). Hinnom becomes Gehenna. The idea of the worm never dying and dead bodies has the closest OT referent in the very last verse of Isaiah. “They shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh” (Isa 66:23).

In the Targums, the Second Death is directly linked to Gehenna. “*Their Punishment shall be in Gehenna where the fire burns all the day. Behold, it is written before me: ‘I will not give them respite while they live, but theirs is the retribution of their sins; I will hand over their bodies to the second death’ ... You shall leave your name to my chosen for an oath, and the LORD God will slay you with the second death; but his servants, the righteous, he will call by a different name*” (TgIsa 65:6, 15). Of course, in Revelation, the Second Death is directly linked to the lake of fire. So Gehenna and the lake of fire are synonymous for at least some people.

Thus far, we have seen that the Devil and the Beast and the False Prophet have been thrown into this lake of fire. Curiously, Jesus says this about the final judgment: “The Judge will say, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels’” (Matt 25:41).

What is this eternal fire? Some want to say it is Gehenna, though the term is not found in this passage. Others want to say it is Jesus’ way of speaking about the lake of fire. Frankly, both fit very well.

NT References to “Hell”					
Hades	Tartarus	Gehenna	Lake of Fire	“Weeping/Gnashing Teeth”	“Outer Darkness”
Matt 11:23	2Pet 2:4	Matt 5:22	Rev 19:20	Matt 8:12	Matt 8:12
Matt 16:18		Matt 5:29	Rev 20:10	Matt 13:42	Matt 22:13
Luke 10:15		Matt 5:30	Rev 20:14	Matt 13:50	Matt 25:30
Acts 2:27		Matt 10:28	Rev 20:15	Matt 22:13	
Acts 2:31		Matt 18:9	Rev 21:8	Matt 24:51	
Rev 1:18		Matt 23:15		Matt 25:30	
Rev 6:8		Matt 23:33		Luke 13:28	
Rev 20:13		Mark 9:45			
Rev 20:14		Mark 9:47			
		Luke 12:5			
		James 3:6			

I’m OK with the idea that Gehenna is the same place as the lake of fire, though I’m not dogmatic about it. What we **must not say** is that the lake of fire is identical with *Hades*. This is made perfectly clear in our passage when it says that Death and Hades are “**thrown into the lake of fire**” (**Rev 20:14**). You can’t be thrown into yourself. What is the image teaching us about Hades being thrown into the lake of fire (i.e. the second death)?

This is where it gets difficult. Here, we have to at least touch upon the very difficult question of *eternal punishment*.

Biblically speaking, there is no question but that when the unrighteous die, at some point they experience punishment from God. We'll deal with **why** in a moment. Virtually all Christians have taught this—even conditionalists and universalists.

The tougher question is *when* and *where* that punishment is, and *how long* it lasts. The Rich Man and Lazarus seems to point that **Hades**, is in fact a place of fire and that the rich man was in torment here. I mean, he says as much. “**Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame**” (**Luke 16:24**). This is a hellish that begins immediately upon physical death. I have a book called *To Hell and Back* in which a doctor details many fascinating first-hand accounts of people who swear that they died, went to hell, but for one reason or another were resuscitated and can now tell the story.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> **Maurice S. Rawlings**, *To Hell and Back: Life After Death—Startling New Evidence* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993). See also **Howard Storm**, *My Descent Into Death* (Random House, 2005). **N. E. Bush** and B. Greyson, “Distressing Near-Death Experiences.” *Psychiatry* 55 (1992): 95-110; [file:///Users/douglasvandorn/Downloads/Psychiatry%20Interpersonal%20&%20Biological%20Processes%20vol.%2055%20iss.%2011%20Greyson,%20Bruce%20Evans%20Bush,%20Nancy%20%20Distressing%20Near-Death%20Experiences%20\(1992\)%2010.1080\\_00332747.1992.110245831%20-%20libgen.li.pdf](file:///Users/douglasvandorn/Downloads/Psychiatry%20Interpersonal%20&%20Biological%20Processes%20vol.%2055%20iss.%2011%20Greyson,%20Bruce%20Evans%20Bush,%20Nancy%20%20Distressing%20Near-Death%20Experiences%20(1992)%2010.1080_00332747.1992.110245831%20-%20libgen.li.pdf); **N. E. Bush** and B. Greyson, “Distressing Near-Death Experiences: The Basics,” *Mo Med* 111.6 (2014): 486-491, [https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6173534/#b3-ms111\\_p0486](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6173534/#b3-ms111_p0486); **P. M. H. Atwater**, “Is There a Hell? Surprising Observations About the Near-Death Experience,” *Journal of Near-Death Studies* 10.3 (1992): 149-60, <https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc799241/m1/1/>.

But there is a question about whether this lasts for eternity or whether it is, at the end of the day, **finite punishment followed by annihilation**. Is the lake of fire a picture of annihilation? It is clearly a different picture from Hades, since the two are not the same thing. So if Death and Hades are destroyed, what does that even mean? Images like **eternal death, outer darkness**, death being thrown into a lake and so on certainly do lend themselves nicely to a finite existence after unbelievers die. What is death, after all, but the absence of life? What is darkness but an absence? There have been many Christians and many fascinating studies supporting this Conditional Punishment view.

But the language of Revelation seems to give **the opposite conclusion**. The devil is “*tormented day and night forever and ever*” (**Rev 20:10**). It doesn't say something like he burns forever and ever, like we might think of Sodom which no longer exists. He is tormented. **Torment necessitates consciousness**.

This is parallel to **14:10-11**, “*He also will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. The smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they*

have no rest.” Conditionalists have tried to seize on this being an eternal burning, and what does burning do? It consumes so that nothing life is left.<sup>18</sup> Hence, they argue for annihilation. However, we saw back there, the structure of the passage will not allow for this. **The smoke and the torment are chiastically parallel.** Furthermore, there are several times where fire is present in the Scripture and it does not in fact obliterate. Granted, that usually happens when the saints are near, but nevertheless, it demonstrates the point.

I’m **sympathetic** to the conditional punishment view. I think there are many texts that could be read this way. There has been a long history of this opinion in the church, though it has never been regarded as particularly orthodox. Our own Confession certainly doesn’t think it is (see LBC 32). Obviously, there are good theological arguments for eternal punishment, which is the orthodox view, but there are plenty of good theological arguments for the non-eternal suffering view too.

One example of the latter is that there is **an existential difficulty** that finite human beings (we have a beginning)

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<sup>18</sup> **Ralph G. Bowles**, “Does Revelation 14:11 Teach Eternal Torment? Examining a Proof-text on Hell,” *EQ* 73:1 (2001): 21-36, [https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/eq/2001-1\\_021.pdf](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/eq/2001-1_021.pdf). For a rebuttal of this view see **Leithart**, 98-99. For the chiasm, see my sermon, “Rev 14:6-20: The Grapes of Wrath.”

who have sinned finite sins would be punished eternally for them. Can you feel why this is such a difficult question? Many orthodox will not allow themselves to. Indeed, I think anyone who finds this question simple is just lying to you and themselves. Yet, fairness is not to let the wicked just die and get off scot-free. That's why virtually everyone agrees that there is some kind of punishment in the afterlife for the wicked. It is impossible to read the Scriptures faithfully and come to any other conclusion. But is it *eternal* punishment and suffering?

There *are* good theological reasons that punishment could be infinite. Perhaps the best is from **Jonathan Edwards** who long ago pointed out that God is an infinite God. Since he is infinite, any violation of his infinite goodness would have to be, by definition, infinitely terrible. Therefore, no other punishment could satisfy the Infinite Judge than infinite punishment. Obviously, some do not find this persuasive. And I do not think that philosophical theology like this by itself can settle the matter.

However, Edwards is himself seizing upon a truth that must be taken into account, and it is not speculative. That truth is *the nature and horror of sin*. Far too many take the nature and horror of sin unbearably lightly, as Lewis pointed

out. As if sin is no big deal or even that it doesn't exist at all! This takes us to the center of our passage. “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” (Rev 20:12-13). We have before us the Final Judgment scene. Everyone is standing before the heavenly throne. Books are opened. This is the center of our passage!

It describes these books in two ways. First, there is the “book of life.” We’ve seen this book before (Rev 3:5; 11:3:8; 17:8). I’ll return to it in a moment. The other idea is that people are judged *according to what they had done*. These are separate but related issues. Jesus has a very long discourse on this at the end of his Olivet Discourse on the Last Days.

<sup>31</sup> “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne.

<sup>32</sup> Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

<sup>33</sup> And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left.

<sup>34</sup> Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.

<sup>35</sup> For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,

<sup>36</sup> I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.'

<sup>37</sup> Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink?

<sup>38</sup> And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you?

<sup>39</sup> And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?'

<sup>40</sup> And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'

<sup>41</sup> "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

<sup>42</sup> For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink,

<sup>43</sup> I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.'

<sup>44</sup> Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?'

<sup>45</sup> Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'

<sup>46</sup> And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

(Matt 25:31-46)

We read here that Jesus is the Judge, and everyone is judged together.<sup>19</sup> They are judged *according to what they have done*. It's just like Revelation 20. Those who go to eternal life and inherit the kingdom **gave him** food when hungry and water when thirsty. They clothed him when naked, visited him when sick and in prison. On the other hand, the wicked **did none of these things**. Jesus says this refers not to himself personally, but to “**the least of these my brothers**.” He refers to true religion, helping widows and orphans, the hungry and needy, the poor and downtrodden. And especially those in the church, for these are his brothers!

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<sup>19</sup> Again, this comports with our reading of Revelation against the Dispensationalists who often see two very different judgments, one from Jesus to the saints, one from the Father to the world that take place at two very different times.

In Revelation 20, the dead are all judged “by what was written in the books, according to what they had done.” The idea is that God keeps a record of our deeds. But not just our *good* deeds. Revelation 21:8 is the parallel, “But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.” Evil deeds also go into those books.

Their wicked deeds is precisely the point where modern man couldn't seem to care less. Remember? There is no God and therefore no standard of right and wrong by which to be judged. Yet, curiously, they hold themselves as the Standard as they sit there in judgment of him! The problem is, they have no recognition of sin and what it is.

Yes, sin is doing bad and wrong things. Those bad things are not determined by a committee, by a group of hypocritical politicians, by a democratic vote, by a social justice warrior teaching who forces students to read a politically correct woke textbook, or by your personal opinion. These things are objective, eternal moral laws. As Lewis was prone to discuss, it is always wrong all the time to kidnap, torture, murder, and eat little babies for fun (it seems

these days we have to add a few more things to get people's attention). Everyone knows that. It is just as wrong to steal someone else's wife, to break into your neighbor's home and take his stuff because you want it, to dishonor your parents in their old age, and so on. It is equally as wrong to have other gods before God, to take his Name in vain, to give worship to someone other than him. Jesus tells us that it is just as wrong, in the sense of condemning us before the Judge, to lust, to hate our brother, to gossip, and to covet.

Yes, **different sins get different punishment**. I think our passage even says as much. However, all sin is in fact a disrespect, a disregard, and a slap in the face to the God who created you, gave you life, gives you breath, gives you food, gives you family, shows you love, shows you providence, gives you gifts, and so much more. Sin is a violation of the created order. It is something we all understand, and this is proven by every person on earth, for we each have our own moral code whereby someone else offends us as we demand justice. If there is no such thing as objective morality, why do we all pretend like there is? Even the most postmodern relativist leftist does it with their personal objective woke moral code that they demand everyone else must live by.

What you have to do is **come to the realization** of what sin is, where it comes from, and how it is a falling short of the glory of God. God is the definition of moral perfection and he in all his attributes therefore necessitates and defines what sin is. It is a falling short of his glory.

All have sinned. And all sin, no matter how small, is a falling short. How you have sinned. Ask yourself how you have violated God's law. Start with the Ten Commandments. Can't find any that you've broken? Be honest. You've *never* lied? You've *never* disobeyed your parents? Not even once? Go sell everything you have and give it to the poor and then follow Christ. Can't do that? The Rich Young Man learned the hard way that this was his sin. Need more? Move from the external to the internal, as Jesus has. Lust. Hatred. Coveting. Be honest with yourself.

Then understand that **the wages of sin is death**. A wage is what you *earn*. It is the judgment. We get what we deserve. Justice on the Last Day is not unfair but the wage of what we earned in this life by our sin and works.

But too many people here have this **totally unbiblical idea of God weighing deeds on scales**, as if all God wants is those scales to balance more good deeds than bad ones. Do you really think that if Hitler helped old ladies across the

street on two different occasions that this would outweigh one edict to send all Jews to death-ovens? Two to one!

Others, really just believers, are terrified that God will show this long video of all their sins and the entire universe will watch it. The latter is interesting because it shows that we are really more afraid of what they would think of our sins than what we know God already does. How terrible to be more afraid of man than God. You say, “But God already knows my sin and my friends don’t.” You’re only proving my point.

For the one, they literally need to hear the bad news of coming judgment, to wake them up while it is only the hairs on their arms that are being singed in the flames of hell. For the other, they are in desperate need of good news.

Unless you are literally hell-bent and desiring to go to this place we have described,<sup>20</sup> sin cannot and must not be the end of this discussion. Notice that there is this book of

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<sup>20</sup> It’s a C. S. Lewis week, I guess. Walls writes something curiously related to how someone could be like this as he thinks through a section of Lewis’ *Great Divorce* (near the end, where he discusses Sarah Smith). “No one chooses to remain in bitterness, resentment, and alienation from those who love him or her is truly happy. And yet bitterness and resentment do offer a certain form of pleasure, twisted though it is. Those who cling to such pleasure may do so with a sense of triumph, illusory as it is, even as they defiantly lock the doors of hell from the inside.” Jerry L. Walls, *Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory: Rethinking the Things that Matter Most* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2015), Apple Books. Leithart has a great discussion of this, because Walls believes in a literal hell that lasts forever. But this hell is, contrary to popular opinion, in the presence of Christ and is a thing of the damned sinner’s own making. See Leithart 2:331-35.

life! That's a book that has names written in it. Those names were written in it *before the foundation of the world*, as Jesus said! This is the doctrine of election.

Election is the teaching that before we are good or bad or had done anything yet in this world, God set his love upon us in Christ. Election precedes good works. Election also, eventually, inevitably leads to and necessitates good works, which is why Christians are also judged by what they do.

All the dead are judged by what is written in the books. If one of the books is the book of life, then what is written in it is simply names. If a name is written in that book of life, then that person will be judged according to whether their name is in it or not. If it is, then their works are based on the fact that they have been given life. Those who are given life do good works. It's that simple. We were created in Christ Jesus for good works (Eph 2:10).

But the best news is that for these people, the second death has no hold over them. They cannot die again, because they have been born again. Notice, "And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire" (Rev 20:15). Ultimately, they are thrown into the lake of fire because their name is not written

in the book. Jesus refers to this as sheep and goats. Goats go to one place; sheep to the other.

But the greatest question of all then is, **what makes someone a sheep and what makes someone a goat?** God does. But we can also answer it that sheep have their names in the book of life; goats do not. However, that begs the question. We could ask, **how is a name written in the book of life?** This gets a little trickier. On one hand, the names are written prior to eternity itself, again, by God. On the other hand, we are all born dead in sins.

But all whose names are written in the book have to be brought from death to life. This happens in time, not in eternity. And no one down here knows whose name is in that book prior to salvation. The book of life provides, perhaps we might call it the legal means by which we come to life so that we will not be harmed by the second death. It is a legal means because the book is opened during the court-trial of the dead. But the legal means is also accompanied by another vital and necessary means that God uses to awaken the spiritually dead. What is that **means?**

Ephesians 2, which we have seen both this week and last, tells us. Though we were all by nature children of wrath and there is nothing in anyone whose name is written in the

book that makes them differ in nature from someone whose name is not, “God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—*by grace you have been saved*” (Eph 2:4-5). That grace raises us up with Christ and seats us in heavenly places, as we saw in Rev 20:4-6 (see Eph 2:6).

So it is God’s grace alone that causes someone to differ. But grace alone is never grace that is all by itself. “For by grace you have been saved *through faith*” (Eph 2:8). Faith in what? Faith in Jesus Christ. Do you believe *in* him? Do you *believe* him? It is faith that Jesus Christ is God, that he has died for my sins, been raised to life that I might be justified—declared not guilty on that Day of Judgment, and ascended to heaven that I might ascend after him.

**This faith is not a work.** It is the opposite of works. Faith is not a good deed that you do to make God happy. Rather, “*faith is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast*” (2:8-9). Faith is the firm conviction that certain hope that Jesus has obeyed God on my behalf, that he has forgiven my sins through his sacrificial, substitutionary death, that God looks upon Christ the spotless Lamb and

credits that spotless perfection to my account on behalf of Christ, by grace.

Make no mistake, **no one is a sheep who remains dead in their trespasses and sins.** Those people are goats. And they go to the lake of fire. But sheep will have faith in Jesus. They will hear the Gospel and be convicted and respond in faith. They trust that this good news is for them, that there is a way to avoid the second death, and that Jesus has gone before them to make it possible.

That's the word I'm preaching to you now. Is God grabbing your heart through these words? Do you hear the voice of Christ calling to you to follow him? Then respond to the call of the Master, who is calling you to himself now. Pray to him, **ask him to forgive you** of your sins, tell him you realize that you cannot stand before him on that day in your own righteousness because you know that you have fallen short of his infinite perfect holy glory. Ask him to forgive you, **and he will.** Then **confess this to the church,** be **baptized,** come to the **Table of Christ** and enjoy sweet communion with him and his people. It is never too late to do this until you are standing before the throne. Then it is.

There's one more interesting way to show this to you today. This is in the parallel with John's Gospel. In John 19,

the King of kings is on trial. Pilate “**sat upon the judgment seat**” to judge (**John 19:13**). Pilate didn’t want the job, but the Jews insisted (**18:31**). It’s **the reversal of all the ancient stories**. Even the Greeks had the gods judging men in the Hall of Judgment. Today, man sits in the Hall of Judgment. So, incredibly, at the heart of our salvation we find the very thing modern man is so quick to want—man has God in the dock. And what does man do? Man finds God guilty and sentences him to die.

And man wins. So he thought.

Little did they know or understand that this was the only way that salvation itself could be provided to them. For in it, **God as man would conquer even death**. Thus, Revelation tells us that in the death and resurrection of Jesus, he now holds the keys of Death and Hades.

And now, you sit at the crossroads. **You may never have another opportunity** to respond the right way as you do right now. You do not know even one day into the future what God has ordained for your days. But you have now. And right now, you are being given the news that in ancient times was good news to all who heard it. If you turn to Jesus in repentance and faith, confessing your sins and his High

Kingship over all the realms of heaven and earth, if you confess these things with your mouth, you will be saved.

The great injustice of the ages is not that God would punish men and woman and children in hell. But neither is it that he would offer salvation and freedom to those who deserve it. For Jesus himself paid the price justice deserves. No, there is no injustice in God. **The only injustice is that someone could hear all that God has done to provide the way to eternal life, touch it, feel it, taste it, see it, and walk away.** May none of us respond that way, for we know that surely there is a day coming when we will all face our Maker and stand before the Judgment Seat of God Almighty. And on the day, what will there be to say?

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