

30

REVELATION 20: 11 – 15

JESUS RETURNS AS JUDGE TO COMPLETE HIS FINAL CLEAN-UP

Are you looking forward to Judgment Day? When I was still teaching young people in our church, and we talked about Lord's Day 19 or 22 of the Heidelberg Catechism, I asked that question sometimes. And then there is always an eager student, who says, "yes, of course".

But then I would say: 'Ok, you gave me the answer you thought the minister would like to hear. So, now for real, be honest: The Last Judgment, is that an event you really look forward to?'

And then someone would suggest, 'I guess we should. But it is kind of scary, this idea, that everything you say and do is going to be exposed and then judged by God, who sees and hears everything!' That is a hesitation we can all relate to, I think.

Revelation 20:11–15 gives us a closer look at this Judgment Day. We know already that the day of Jesus' return, his glorious second coming, is going to be full of dramatic events. It sees the destruction of Babylon, the antichristian culture. That was in Rev. 17 and 18. But we have also seen that this does not complete Jesus' final clean-up.

In 19:11–21 we heard about the destruction of the beast and the false prophet. In 20:1–10 we heard about the destruction of Satan. One more act is still required. Now it is time to strike the final balance of the history of our world. And in this one we are all personally involved.

One thing to keep in mind, when we look at the Last Judgment in John's vision in this passage, please remember again that the events in Revelation 17 - 20 do not happen in chronological order, but simultaneously.

John's description of the Last Judgment is sober, but the reality is pretty overwhelming.

THE JUDGE

The vision John describes for us in the passage at the end of Rev. 20, highlights another element of the many things that are happening on the day of Jesus' return, the day of his second coming. This day will also be the day of the Last Judgment.

After the elimination of Satan and his evil sidekicks, the Beast and the False Prophet (Rev. 19:20 and 20:10), the final clean-up on the day of Christ's return is now almost complete. But this last action is different. This event comes close to each and every one of us. And it will affect all people directly and personally.

In the scenes that the glorified Christ has shown to his servant John, the end of our present world has now arrived. Through John's eyes we have seen, with the view from above, all that has led up to this decisive moment.

Then I saw a great white throne, and him who was seated on it.

It is not the first time that the apostle John sees this throne. The wording tells us that this is the same throne he has seen when it all started, in Rev. 4. He sees the heavenly throne of God. And when you read through that chapter, you can see how there already the emphasis is on the splendid glory, and the universal power and authority of the One who is seated on this throne.

John does not name the One on the throne, but, also in light of the connection with Rev. 4, it is clear that it must be the holy and almighty God himself.

You can also think of the glorified Christ sitting on this throne. In Matt. 25:31 Jesus says that, *when the Son of Man comes, he will sit on his glorious throne*. And in 2 Cor. 5:10 Paul speaks about *the judgment seat of Christ*.

However, this is not really a contradiction. In John 5:22 Jesus says that *the Father has given all judgment to the Son*. Jesus does not only return as Warrior (Rev.19:11) or as King (Rev. 20:4,6), but also as Judge. This is how we will meet him here in John's vision. And this is how we will all meet him one day in person.

We hear two things about this throne. It is "great" and it is "white". Its greatness has nothing to do with actual measurements, but it reflects the marvellous grandeur, the immense, superior power and authority of the Judge who sits on it. The colour 'white' reflects God's glorious light, his heavenly holiness.

John's vision unfolds for us the superior power, the great splendour and dazzling holiness of him who is going to speak the very last word, the word that will bring to completion the history of our world.

The world as we know it will face the final judgment.

It is good to pause and think about this for a moment: there will be a Day of Judgment. Which means that there is a Judge. Now you and I may take this for granted but do not be mistaken, this whole idea of a Judge and a Day of Judgment is not very popular.

To begin with, many Christians have a hard time matching the thought of an eternal punishment with everything they read in the Bible about God's love. How can a God who is love, condemn people for what they are doing? Should we not tell people about God's love? "Come to God, come to Jesus. He will not judge you. He will not condemn you. He accepts you as you are. And in the end everyone is going to be saved anyway."

But, is that correct?

And then, for people who are not Christians, this idea of a Divine Judge, who will one day call everyone to account, is just bizarre. This is the prevailing view in our culture. There is no one above us. There is no one to tell us what is right or wrong. We are on our own. We are not accountable to any-

one above us, not even to each other. We are only accountable to ourselves, to our own conscience.

There is no Judge. And there will be no judgment day. Everything will just go on, as it always has. This way of thinking is actually predicted in the Bible already (2 Peter 3:3,4). And that is okay, they suggest. There is nothing to worry about.

But if that is true, if there is indeed no Judge, and there is no real accountability, we have lots to worry about.

Try to imagine that there is no Judge. Some of you may have seen movies or TV shows where much of the action takes place in courtrooms. You see a courtroom filled with people: defendant, plaintiff, prosecutor, lawyers, witnesses, etc. Everyone is waiting for the judge to appear. When the judge is seated on the bench, he is supposed to apply the rule-of-law, so that justice will be done.

Now imagine that everyone is waiting, and waiting, but no one shows up. There is no judge. And no judge means 'no justice', because there is no one to apply the rule-of-law. Everybody is going home dissatisfied, for no one is held responsible for the crimes that have been committed.

What are people going to do if that would happen all the time? What do people do when the justice system fails in society? They stack up on guns and take the law in their own hands. But that is terrifying. Everyone is going to make up his own law and defend his own idea of justice. A lawless society turns into a violent and dangerous society.

Let's get back to our world, and think of it as one, huge courtroom. Yes, there are many decent people, but we all know it is a world filled with sin, evil, injustice, corruption, oppression, violent persecution, racism, hatred, gang-rape, and you name it. Do you know how many refugees there are in our world? The latest number is over 70 million. That is incredible. And then imagine, there is no Judge. There is no one on the bench. There will never be a Judgment Day.

What does that mean? It means that there is no way for the victims to find justice. There is no way that criminals and oppressors will be held account-

able and be prosecuted. If there is no one to apply the rule-of-law in this world, then there is no proper way to deal with sin, evil and injustice.

And then what? Then as nations, political parties, dictators, criminal organisations, even religions, we are all going to make up and enforce our own laws that serve our own interests. This will often mean political unrest, and sometimes war or civil war. But none of that will ever guarantee that ‘justice’ will be done.

But the Bible assures us: do not be afraid that evil and injustice will go unpunished. There IS a Judge. That is good news. The bench in the courtroom of this world is not empty. Jesus himself says so in John 12:48: *There is a Judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words.* [NIV]

Indeed, we are accountable to the One who made us. We all are. He comes and will apply the rule-of-law. The rule of HIS eternal law. He comes and no injustice or suffering will ever escape him. He comes and all wrongs will be righted. He comes and those who persecute, and practice evil and injustice will not get away with it.

Yes, there is a Judge, and John saw him. He has seen his power and glory. A power and glory so majestic, so overwhelming that *earth and sky fled away and no place was found for them*. This is the same as when the Bible says elsewhere that “heaven and earth will perish, or vanish, or pass away” (Isaiah 51:6; Psalm 102; Matthew 24:35). “Earth and sky” stands for the creation corrupted by sin. When Christ appears in his glorious majesty, they disappear without leaving a trace, to make room for what is coming.

In the end all that remains in the whole universe is the great white throne and the One who is seated on it. In the end this throne stands as the only firm, immovable, reliable point, with nothing left to challenge its absolute supremacy.

When the Judge begins to speak, all obstacles between God and humanity are removed. Nothing impairs the reality of a face-to-face encounter with the heavenly Judge. We have nowhere to hide when the summons comes from God’s throne: “What did you do with my world? What did you do to my people? What did you do with the life I gave you?”

THE SUMMONS

Then John also sees those who have been summoned to appear before the throne and to face the Judge. Who are they? In v.12 the apostle reports: *And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne.*

Now, that sounds kind of spooky, would you not agree? John saw “the dead”. Was he seeing ‘dead men walking’ as in the *Zombie* movies of some ten years ago?

No, he was not. In v.13 he explains what has happened in the meantime: *The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them.* As it turns out, and that is in line with the rest of Scripture, the day of Jesus’ return is also the day of the resurrection of all of mankind.

In Rev. 1:18 “Death & Hades” are also mentioned as companions that are hostile to God. There the glorified Christ assures John that he is the Living One, who holds the keys of Death and Hades. They also appear as a murderous duo when the Lamb opens the fourth seal. That is in Rev. 6:8. You could say that “death” is the power that separates body and soul, and “Hades” keeps” them separate.

In the past “Hades” was sometimes translated as ‘hell’, but it is not the same. Today it is sometimes translated as “the grave”, but that does not quite cover it either. It is the realm where the dead are waiting for the day of the resurrection. Even believers, who come to life and reign with Christ after they die on earth, which in Rev. 20:5 is called ‘the first resurrection, even they can still be said to be physically in Hades as they are still waiting for the second resurrection, the resurrection of the bodies on the day of Jesus’ return.

That ‘the sea’ is mentioned in this context is kind of puzzling, and it is probably best to think of it as another image of the powerful hostile realm that holds the dead in its grip. Put together, we get a picture of a location where people end up after their physical death rips apart body and soul.

However, no matter how powerful and frightening that is, Death & Hades do not own these dead bodies. God has allowed them to take them. But that is temporary. He remains in control, and when he demands them back, they

must give them up. All these dead bodies, the glorified Jesus Christ claims them. And here they come!

In v.12 and 13 John uses the expression “the dead” four times. It stresses that all the dead come back to life. Not one stays behind. All the tombs break open. Believers and unbelievers alike, everyone will be confronted with the coming judgment!

Perhaps you remember that “pre-millennialists” believe in two bodily resurrections: one before the (literal) thousand years reign, and one after. But the Bible does not know about two such resurrections. No, at the same time, in one massive physical resurrection on the last day, all people everywhere who have ever lived on earth will come to life when the summons is issued from God’s throne.

Jesus himself has confirmed this. In Matthew 25:31, 32 he says: *When the Son of Man comes in his glory..., He will sit on his throne..., and all the nations will be gathered before him.* And in John 5:28, 29 he tells us that *an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out...*

This is so incredibly amazing. How in the world do you visualize something like this? It is impossible. It is mind-boggling already when you stand in the middle of a large cemetery, and you try to imagine what it is like when all these tombstones start moving and all around you the people come out. But then all the dead! We are with more than seven billion on the earth right now, and no one knows the number of those who have died since the beginning, or where all these bodies are.

But this is what John is seeing. He must have been stunned. There they stand, summoned for judgment, waiting for what is coming, waiting for the final word of the Judge. All of them. All of us, *great and small.*

This means that, regardless of rank or social status, the important and the insignificant, the wealthy and the poor, the powerful and the oppressed, all of them are summoned to appear before the throne of the Great Judge. No one is exempt on that day. No one is **so** great, or powerful or wealthy that he can get away with evil and escape judgment. No one is **so** small, or insignificant that he will be overlooked.

There they all stand, deeply impressed by the glory of the Judge sitting on the great white throne. Whether it fills them with joy or with an anger that makes them gnash their teeth, they all see his glorious power and they all have to acknowledge his right to judge *each one of them according to what they have done* (13b).

So, how is all this going to unfold on that day?

Well, John also sees that *books were opened*. And that *the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done* (12).

These “books” with the records of everyone’s words and actions are not literal books. That would make for the biggest library in the universe. No, they stand for the reality that, whatever you and I and everyone else says and does, God will always know. He will always remember how your words and deeds show your spiritual loyalty either to God and Jesus Christ, or to Satan and the antichristian culture of the Beast. And he will hold you accountable for all of it.

Scripture stresses this accountability in more places. In Matthew 12:36, 37 Jesus says: *I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned*. And the apostle Paul warns in 2 Corinthians 5:10 that *we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil*.

In Matthew 25: 31 – 46 Jesus gives us a little peek in how this is going to work.

And remember, this Judge only goes by what is on record. Privileged positions do not play a role. The image of ‘books’ reflects the actual presence of proven and undeniable evidence. Only the facts will speak for themselves. This makes for a fair judgment.

What everyone receives is only the result of his or her own activities, nothing more and nothing less. That is fair.

Let us make this concrete: Mr. or Mrs. X..., volume #....., page #..... And there you have it, your complete file. It is all there, the total sum of your

whole life. It shows everything. And there is much more on record than you would care to remember. And it is much worse than you might have thought.

Indeed, even my Christian desire to love and obey God, to live in faith and hold on to Jesus, it was often weak, and I have often failed. It is all tainted by my sin. Altogether, it is not good news.

But John sees more. There was another book, which was also opened. It is called “the book of life”. We have heard about that book a few times already in Revelation. There is something peculiar about this book.

It does not have a list of things you have done or failed to do, but it is always about people who are, or who are not, listed in it. This book does not have a list of achievements. It has a list of names, all the names of God’s children. It is the register of the Redeemed.

And again, it is not a literal book, but it stands for the reality that God knows all who belong to him, and that he will not lose any of them. As Jesus says about his followers in John 10:28, *I give them eternal life, and they will never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand.* They are the ones who have come to life spiritually already in the first resurrection, mentioned in Rev. 20:4,5.

Here is your surprise on the Day of Judgment: if your name is in the book of life, you will find the page in the other book, where all you sinful words and deeds are supposed to be, you’ll find that page blank, clean, spotless. Your sins have been deleted, covered up by the blood of Jesus. And all that is left are the good things you did not even remember.

Think again of Jesus’ words in Matthew 25:34–40.

How is that possible? Well, ‘the book of life’ is not filled by you or by me. It does not describe our achievements. It is filled by God himself. And it has a subtitle, so to speak. It says, “Saved by Grace”.

The final judgment on the day of Jesus’ return is based on what is written in those two books. Together they picture how God’s justice and God’s mercy go hand-in-hand. This is incredibly encouraging for those who know themselves to be God’s children by God’s grace in Jesus Christ.

But do not take it for granted. Do not just say, “If you’re in the book of life you’re ok as God’s elect, so that it doesn’t matter how you live and what you do with your life. But if your name is not in the book of life, you will be punished for all your sins.”

Remember that we see John’s vision of what is coming! It is not here yet. Hearing about these books with records today is not intended to make you feel smug and complacent. You have not arrived yet.

No, the picture of these books with records comes today with the most urgent call to repent. Break with sin. Embrace Jesus Christ and his saving grace. Live joyful and thankful lives out of God’s love and for his glory. Show this in your attitude and in the things you say and do – every day. And share your gratitude with others.

Hearing about the ‘book of life’ today, comes with the urgent question: how can I be sure that my name is written in this book? And the answer is not, “you can only wait and see and hope for the best”. No, no, believe with all your heart in your Saviour Jesus. Believe that the forgiveness of your sins is in him alone. Believe that his death and resurrection alone makes you share in God’s mercy.

But if you treat God’s gracious love in Jesus carelessly, you might lose it.

Are you ready for Judgment Day?

THE VERDICT

To underline how urgent that last question is, John also pictures for us the final outcome of the Last Judgment; the verdict of the Judge on the great white throne (v.14): *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.*

We have heard about this lake of fire before. In Rev. 19:20 the beast and the false prophet, Satan’s evil helpers, *were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur.* Then, in Rev. 20:10, the devil himself was thrown into this same lake, this place of horror and torment. This will now also be the

destination of Death & Hades, after their prisoners have been released in the second resurrection.

Almost everything is now in its proper place. Jesus Christ's final clean-up is almost complete. The destructive powers of Death & Hades are done away with, as they join the other masters of evil where they belong, the second death, which is eternal death, eternal punishment, hell! Evil will be gone forever. Death will be powerless forever. As Paul promised in 1 Corinthians 15:26, *the last enemy to be destroyed is death*. This was actually promised in the Old Testament already. The prophet Isaiah says, *the LORD Almighty will swallow up death forever* (Isaiah 25:8).

What a comfort! Hear the triumphant song of the apostle Paul: *Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?* (1 Cor. 15:54, 55). Neither on the new heaven and the new earth, nor even in hell, body and soul will ever be separated again. All cemeteries will be closed forever. And there will be no more funerals, ever! The powers that have severely damaged God's creation since the fall into sin, will be removed, and they will never rear their ugly heads again.

And anyone whose name was not in the 'book of life', because they refused to believe in Jesus, and they have resisted God's majesty and mercy, they will join God's enemies in their proper place. With them they will gnash their teeth in anger and be tormented day and night for ever and ever (20:10).

It is a horrible punishment. But no one can complain about it. It is a fair judgment. Their own deeds and their own words will condemn them. Because their deeds and words show the refusal to turn to the blood of Jesus for forgiveness and to live by God's grace alone.

And what about those whose names were written in the 'book of life'?

John does not tell us, not yet! But as he completes his final clean-up, by removing the old order of things, and by eliminating sin, evil and death, the holy God is making room for a brand-new beginning.

John's vision of the Day of Judgment shows that our journey to the new Promised Land is almost over. That is full of exciting expectations. But it also underlines how urgent it is to repent. Break with sin and turn to Jesus as long as it is still possible.

Today we are still on this journey. Funerals are still part of our experiences because the power of death is still around. But its days are numbered.

And in John's vision the glorified Christ will show us, from above, what we are heading towards, when our names are listed in God's 'book of life'.

So keep your eyes peeled for the breathtaking splendour of what is coming!

2. Read Matthew 12:22-30 [in particular v.29], and also Luke 10:17-18, and John 12:31-32. Could there be a possible link between Rev. 20:2 and these passages? How would that help you to understand the 1000 years period?
3. How can we see that today we live in this period of a thousand years and that Satan's power is indeed restrained?
4. What does this passage mean with: the 1st resurrection; the 2nd resurrection; the 1st death and the 2nd death?

Chapter 30 – Revelation 20:11-15

1. How do passages like Matthew 25:31-46, Romans 2:6-10 and 2 Corinthians 5:10 connect with Rev. 20:11-15?
2. In Rev. 19 and 20 we read how all the enemies of Christ are systematically eliminated. What is the significance of this for us today and for the future?
3. Today the reality of 'hell' as a place of never-ending punishment is not only rejected by those who do not believe in God or in an afterlife, but it is also heavily disputed by many Christians. How can a loving God punish eternally? What about the view that in the end everyone is going to be okay?
4. Those who do not believe that hell is a place of eternal punishment have sometimes turned to the idea of *annihilation* or to *universalism*. What do these terms mean and why are they consistent or inconsistent with Biblical teaching?

Chapter 31 – Revelation 21:1-8

1. The new heaven, the new earth, the new Jerusalem are obviously the very opposite of the old heaven, the old earth and the old Jerusalem. Explain the differences between the 'old' and the 'new', and also how the 'new' versions relate to the 'old' ones.
2. What kind of connection do you see between Rev. 21:1 and Genesis 1:1?
3. The saying *I am the Alpha and the Omega* is also found in Rev. 1:8. What does this tell us about the Book of Revelation and about the visions in this book?