

THE DAY OF JUDGEMENT

“Then I saw a great white throne and him who sat upon 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 the books were opened. Also another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, by what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead in them, and all were judged by 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 any one’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”

(Revelation 20: 11-15)

We come to the last of the events described in the vision of the binding of Satan. We know that Satan has been cast into the lake of fire, into hell, with the two beasts who served his cause on earth, and in that sense the vision has come full circle. Satan is bound, eternally, not just in the bottomless pit, but in the fire of hell.

That is undoubtedly an awful fate. Still, the vision has not ended. Now follows, after the judgment of Satan, a very vivid description of the judgment of *all people*.

ONE RETURN; ONE RESURRECTION

It is clear from this passage and from the context in which it is placed that as there is one return of Christ, so there is only one physical resurrection, and subsequently one full and final judgment. No one who ever lived on this earth will be able to escape that judgment. There are no absentees, there is no exemption; everyone will be individually judged by Christ according to what he has done in the body on earth, as Paul writes in his second letter to the Corinthians (5: 10).

I mentioned earlier that the vision of the binding of Satan is given to the church for our comfort. We must keep this in mind also when we look at these last verses of the vision. The Lord Jesus does not want to frighten us so that we will expect this day with fear and trembling. He wishes to comfort us here so that we may – as the Belgic Confession puts it so beautifully in Article 37 – anticipate it with great joy. For it is not a day of the church’s annihilation, but one of vindication, one for which the saints by God’s grace have longed throughout the centuries.

OPENING OF BOOKS

A key element in this last part of the vision is the opening of books. “Judgment” means that books are opened and that by them the evidence is presented to determine the outcome of the verdict. And it is on these books and their opening that I want to focus in particular.

We see, then, how after the casting of Satan into hell, the Lord opens the books on the day of judgment. Reference is made to *all* the books of our lives, as well as to the opening of the *one book of life*.

The history of this world does not end with the casting of Satan into the lake of fire. We read in the text, “Then I saw a great white throne and Him Who sat on it.” The stage is being set, as it were, for an official event, namely the final judgment. This “throne,” reminiscent of what Daniel wrote of many centuries before, was introduced earlier in Revelation 4, but is now more fully described. First we note that it is a great throne, denoting the greatness and glory of God to whom the throne belongs. It is also called a white throne, and, as you know, the colour “white” in the book Revelation denotes holiness and righteousness. He who is seated on the throne will judge according to His absolute holiness and in complete righteousness.

NO ESCAPE FROM JUDGMENT

Notice that John does not give a description of the One sitting on the throne. We may think of God, the Father, of whom we know that He inhabits this throne. We may also think here of the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who has been designated as the One who will judge the living and the dead.

It is remarkable that the very appearance of God on His throne is so awesome that it causes all creation to flee. We read, “. . . from His presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them.” What do these words mean? I think that we must understand, first of all, that there is no escape from the last judgment. Everything, all creation will be affected. Not one person will be able to find a place to hide. But secondly, these words indicate that “earth and sky” (denoting our world as we know it) will disappear. The present world will cease to exist. The judgment of God marks the end of this world, this earth, as we know it.

John does not describe in detail how this will take place. But elsewhere, in II Peter 3: 10-13, we do read what will happen. As the dead rise to face the throne of judgment, this present world will be burnt down. Peter writes: the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burnt up. This world with all its great monuments of human achievement, the proud architecture of fallen man, will simply be melted down by the fire of God’s judgment, and out of those elements God will fashion a new earth for His children.

ALL MANKIND JUDGED

John does not describe that aspect. He is more concerned with the judgment of mankind. We read in verse 12, “And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne . . .” Notice also in this connection what we read in verse 13, “And the sea gave up the dead in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead in them. . . .”

It is clear that this judgment will include all who ever lived. The earthly distinctions of position and rank have no more bearing. The dead include great and small, and by this John means those who were powerful and mighty (the great) and those who had no position (the small). Whether you were a king or a subject, a prince or a pauper, an aristocrat or a commoner on this earth has no bearing on your entering into judgment, nor does it affect the outcome of the judgment.

It also does not matter any more how you died. Notice how the dead are brought back from the realms of Death and Hades. There was perhaps no trace left of any human remains. Think of those whose bodies were burned to ashes, and whose ashes were spread out over the waves. Who could ever imagine that such bodies would ever rise, fully intact, completely restored?

There are those who insist that their bodies be cremated, the bones pulverized, and the ashes cast out into the wind. Some may think that by doing so they can prevent any possible resurrection. How could God ever raise such disintegrated flesh and bone? Dead is dead, gone is gone, never to rise again. But, in the light of God’s Word and power, how foolish are such notions.

God knows exactly each one of the dead, and He raises them all, believers and unbelievers alike, so that each person will stand individually before His throne of judgement. There is no one who lived who can escape.

Even the “sea,” that mass-burial place with no markers or tombstones, that place from which no human returns, gives up the dead. God doesn’t need a tombstone or marker to locate anyone, for by His simple command they all rise to stand before Him.

STANDING BEFORE THE JUDGE

Now it is not easy for us to picture what John saw and describes. We read of the dead standing before the throne, and it conjures up an image of a multitude of people (billions upon billions) standing before a single throne, something very hard for us to understand from our perspective of space. But the word “standing” here denotes a certain posture. Just as a defendant must rise in the courtroom to face the judge, so all people must stand before God, in great awe, with total reverence, in full recognition of the solemnity of the moment, to hear the verdict that will be pronounced.

This is how we must interpret the word “standing.” No contempt of court is allowed here, for the Judge of heaven and earth is about to speak His verdict. It is as if the bailiff says, “All rise.” And all stand as the judge ascends the bench, in this case, the throne. The moment of absolute truth has arrived. That is the impact of these words.

BOOKS OPENED

Then we read, “books were opened.” It is an unqualified word, books (plural) denoting many. A little further we read that these books are actually record books in which our deeds have been written.

This text reminds us of what we find in Daniel 10: 9-11, where the judgment of God is also described: “. . . ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him; the court sat in judgment and books were opened.”

This notion of books being opened may seem frightening, at first reading, but it is done because of God’s righteousness. When justice is to be done, nothing may be charged wrongly. At the same time, all the evil which we have done must be brought forward as proper evidence. For God judges not on the basis of rumour or hear-say, but on the basis of the facts. You may be assured of this, that God will not charge anyone with something he didn’t do, nor will He overlook the evil that someone did do.

BOOKS AND CONSCIENCES?

Books were opened. For many years the Reformed churches understood this expression to mean that the consciences were opened. That is how we had it in the Belgic Confession, Article 37, “the books that is, the consciences of men were

opened.” The word “consciences” was dropped in 1983, although the notion itself has not completely disappeared from the article.

The idea was that when we are confronted with all our sins we will also admit to them. Our lives will pass before our very eyes. God will present us with such clear evidence and proof that we will not deny it but admit that what has been written is fully correct.

The same is said regarding the ungodly and the wicked. We read in Article 37, “the wicked shall be convicted by the testimony of their own consciences. . . .” As much as ungodly people denied sin and wrongdoing during their life, even until the day they died, so they will have to admit fully before God and will know in their own hearts: yes, we have sinned, wilfully, knowingly, and with dedication. There will be no one who comes up with any lawful excuse. No one will blame another, for everyone will see the true facts, as recorded by God in His infallible righteousness: yes, this is indeed what I said and did.

Books are opened. God will open to us all the books of our lives. And we will have to admit that we have sinned and are worthy of death. On that day, it will be clear to us as never before how depraved we were by nature and how often and how deeply this showed throughout our lives.

RENDERING ACCOUNT

The Belgic Confession puts it this way: “. . .all people will render account for every careless word they utter, which the world regards as mere jest and amusement. The secrets and hypocrisies of men will then be publicly uncovered in the sight of all.”

Every evil word you said, even in jest. Every dirty joke, every foul word, all misuse of God’s Name, it’s in the book. Every secret sin, which no one saw except God, it’s in the book. Every hypocritical act, insincerity and untruthfulness of which people did not know and which they could never even surmise, it’s in the book.

And did you notice that the confession says: this will be publicly uncovered in the sight of all? Is that not frightening? There goes my carefully built and protected reputation, my almost impeccable name for which I worked so hard.

Do you know on what Bible passages these words of our confession are based? On such texts as Matthew 12: 36,37: “I tell you, on the day of judgment men will render account for every careless word they utter; for by your words you will be justified and by your words you will be condemned.” Woe to those who have publicly condemned others for certain sins, but secretly done the same or worse themselves. It will come out publicly on that day.

Remember what Jesus said to His disciples when He warned them for the leaven – the hypocrisy – of the Pharisees, “Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. Therefore, whatever you have said in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms

shall be proclaimed from the rooftops” (Luke 12: 2, 3). We will not get away with anything on that day, no matter what we got away with in this life.

It’s in the books, and when the books are opened, it will come out, and all will see and we will know that it is true. There will be no excuses, no cover-up, no pointing to others. I, wretched sinner, I am guilty of all these things written in the books, I am deserving of eternal death.

It reminds us of a *public* trial, where the facts are presented, verified, and published, so that everyone may know for sure, without a doubt: this person here is guilty as charged. There is no room for error, no margin for mistakes, for the books are one hundred per cent accurate.

A FRIGHTENING PROSPECT?

Again, this is not meant to frighten us. For if we have honestly and humbly in this life confessed our sins, and if we have walked sincerely with our God, without hypocrisy, will we be afraid of the truth? Ashamed? Yes! But afraid? No! We need only be frightened if we nurture our sins, harbour them in secret pleasure, and refuse to confess them and repent of them.

It is not meant to frighten us, but it is meant to make us very serious in our Christian life and very honest before God and our fellow men. Why should we pile up shame upon shame for that day? We should never think, “Oh, well, I’m saved anyway, so I can go ahead and do this or that evil.” On the contrary, knowing the seriousness of the day of judgment, when the books of our lives are opened, we will battle our sinful nature unceasingly. Therefore, daily conversion is so important, especially with a view to that day, so that we need not shrink back at Christ’s coming, but may have full confidence to face Him in the sure knowledge that our names are also written in that other book, the book of Life!

THE BOOK OF LIFE

For if the books of our deeds were the only ones to be opened on that day, we’d all be in deep trouble and face a hopeless reality of eternal despair. But John writes, “Also another book was opened, which is the book of life.” The same term returns at the end of this text: if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”

There is a book of life. Notice here “book” in the singular. One book, expressing the unity of God’s eternal decree, which contains the names of all God’s children. And, of course, we understand that this book contains the names of those whom God has chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world. He knows them by name, and has written these names in that one book of life, the book which symbolizes eternal and blessed life.

This “book of life” is in many ways a marvellous book. It contains not only the names of the saints, but also their trials and sufferings for Christ’s sake. It is not the first time that we read of a “book of life,” an exact record of those who are

saved. The prophet Daniel already was able to speak of this book, chapter 12: 1: “at that time [the time of the end, that is, the resurrection] your people shall be delivered, every one whose name shall be found written in the book.” God remembers His own in their trials to deliver them and to raise them to glory on the great day. I think of Psalm 56: 8, “Thou has kept count of my tossing; put Thou my tears in Thy bottle! Are they not in Thy book?”

Who can count the number of times we toss and turn in turmoil during sleepless nights? But God knows! He keeps track of our anguish and pain. He records not just our sins, but also our trials. He knows of our silent prayers and quiet pleas. He counts each and every tear that we cry in and for His service. Would anyone really think that all God does is keep a record of our sins and not of our trials and our battles?

THE WONDER OF THE BOOK OF LIFE

There are some beautiful texts about the book of life in the Bible. In Matthew 10, when the seventy who were sent out returned jubilantly because even the demons had to obey them, Christ said, “. . . do not rejoice at this that the spirits are subject to you, but that your names are written in heaven.” Of what advantage are earthly conquests if our heavenly safety is not guaranteed? What is more important, experiencing a victory here on earth or being assured of victory on the new earth: our names written in heaven?

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul writes of various people, Euodia and Syntyche (two women in the congregation) and Clement and the rest of his fellow workers, that their “names are written in the book of life.” They were not perfect people, for just a little earlier he was admonishing them to stop quarrelling and to be one in the Lord! You see, you do not have to be perfect to be in that book, but you must love the Lord and serve Him.

HOW DO I KNOW?

Now the question may be asked: how do I know if *my name* is in that book of life? We can sometimes struggle with this question. Let me ask another question first. How do you know that you are in those other books? I know that I am in those other books, because I believe and confess that I am a sinner. This I know, because the Bible tells me so! Precisely. And so I know that I am in the book of life because I believe that Christ has paid for my sins. This too I know, because the Bible tells me so!

It is by faith alone in Christ that we can sing, “For in the book of life Thou didst engrave me, Thou hast upheld me, foes could not enslave me” (Psalm 56). I know by faith alone that I am in that book.

This is what the Holy Spirit confirms in our hearts by the preaching of the Gospel. Of this we see the fruits in our life. Of this we receive the necessary assurance. There are never enough fruits. Sometimes the assurance is not felt. We

ride all the crests of the waves of human emotions. But by faith we do know: my name is in that book of life!

Not that we deserve it. The books of our life convict us. Our own conscience accuses us. The facts cannot be denied or hidden. It is by grace alone in Christ through faith. On that day, God will open the book of life, and He will say: you who have believed in the Son of God, enter into the glory of your Lord! It is Christ who gives us a place in the book of life.

GREATER THAN MOSES

Let me illustrate this clearly. When the LORD God was going to destroy Israel for making a golden calf and worshipping it, Moses once made this rather bold statement to the LORD. He said, “Alas, this people have sinned a great sin; they have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if Thou wilt forgive their sin – but if not, I pray Thee, blot me out of Thy book which Thou hast written” (Exodus 32: 31, 32).

Moses volunteers to stand in Israel’s place and be blotted out of God’s book for their sake! Is this a bold word? Well, Moses was the “mediator of the old covenant.” But God would not accept Moses’ offer. He said, “Whoever has sinned against Me, him will I blot out of My book.”

Do you see the implication? Only Jesus Christ, the true and eternal Mediator, greater than Moses, could atone in our place, so that our names could be maintained in the book of life. Not Moses, but Christ was “blotted out,” underwent the agony of hell and eternal death, so that our names might be inscribed forever in God’s book of life.

We read in Hebrews 9: 15, “Therefore [Christ] is the Mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised inheritance. . . .” Moses could not atone for God’s people; Christ could and did.

THE FINAL QUESTION

No one or nothing can erase our name from the book of life, except God. Therefore God’s service does remain a serious matter. Is it not amazing that David in Psalm 69 dares to ask of God about his foes, “Blot Thou their names out of the book of life, let them not be enroled among the righteous”? Did you ever take careful notice of those words? Blot thou their names out of the book of life! Is that possible?

If you’re written in, can you be written out? Was David being vindictive here? No, David is appealing to the justice of the LORD over those who bear the sign of God’s covenant but who oppose God’s Word and reject His anointed. David uses here a terminology that is similar to our speaking of “excommunication.” David is making the connection: the gift of life is extended only to God’s children who serve Him with joy and zeal. If they do not, they should be removed from Israel.

But only God, not man, determines who is in that book. He alone bestows

eternal life or eternal death. And He has written into the book of life the names of those whom in His sovereign grace He saved in Christ.

Saved in Christ. The question is not: am I written in the book of life? The question is: do I believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, the anointed of God, the only Messiah? Do I serve Him with all my heart? I am God's covenant child, do I also live like one? If you answer "yes" to these questions, you should have and will have no problem with that other one, "Am I written in the book of life?" It will not be a question, but a joyous confession:

We, too, shall stand before the throne,
Then shall our names be found
Recorded in the book of life.
How shall our joy abound. (Hymn 55).

Joy after much struggle. Struggle against sin and Satan. Struggle with much weakness. But always with the certainty of triumph in Christ. Now the vision of the binding of Satan has really ended, the eternal binding of Satan and all ungodly people; and the eternal liberation and glorification of all who have hoped in Christ Jesus and longed for His Day have really begun.

Don't be afraid of that day. The Belgic Confession concludes as follows: "Therefore we look forward to that great day with a great longing to enjoy to the full the promises of God in Jesus Christ, our Lord."

Come, Lord Jesus.