

Session 25 Final Judgement - New Heaven and Earth Revelation 20:11-21:8

Final judgement, v11-15

"Then I saw ..." **"A great white throne and Him Who sat on it"**. It is the throne of the Creator and the Lamb, 3:21, 5:6, 22:1, the throne described in previous visions, 4:2-6, 5:6, 7:9-17, 14:2-5.

The description here emphasises **the majesty and holiness and the victory of the One seated there**.

We encountered it first as **a place of worship, salvation, and comfort**. Now it is **a place of fearsome judgement** from which the broken creation itself flees away, in preparation for the new creation, 21:5, c.f. Heb.1:10-12/Psalm 102:25-27, Heb. 12:25-29/Haggai 2:6-7, 2Pet. 3:10-13.

Both the Father and the Son are involved in the judgement, the Son acting as the agent of the Father, John 5:18-30, Matt. 7:21-23, 25:31-46, Acts 17:24-31, 2Cor. 5:9-11, 2Thess. 1:4-10.

The old creation has served its purpose and is destroyed; Isaiah 51:6, Romans 8:18-22, 2Peter 2:7-10, Rev. 16:20, **in order to give way to the new heaven and earth**, 21:1. **Earthly Jerusalem disappears, replaced by the New Jerusalem**, 21:2.

Judgement at that throne is on the basis of written records:

- **Books**. Dan. 7:9-14 is the OT passage that most closely connects with Rev 20 - see Dan.7:10.
- **Everything is done in perfect justice, according to the faithful record**. "The dead were judged according to their works, by the things that were written in the books", v12-13.
- **The Book of Life**, v12,15, c.f. 3:5, 13:8, 17:8, 21:27, 22:19, Phil. 4:3. This goes back to **Moses**, Exodus 32:31-33, with the warning that persistent, flagrant sin could result in exclusion from God's book. **The psalmist** prayed that those who persecuted the righteous would be blotted out of the book of the living, 69:26-28.

There is a difficult paradox. How is it possible to be included in the Book of Life and subsequently to be blotted out? A fully satisfying answer is elusive; perhaps the resolution (as in the book of Hebrews) is found in the question "What does it mean to truly believe?" "Narrow is the gate and difficult the way that leads to life, Matt. 7:13-14. c.f. 5:27-30. We know if we follow on to know the LORD, Hos. 6:3, c.f. 2Tim. 2:16-19, **"The Lord knows those who are His - let him who names the Name of the Lord depart from iniquity"**, v19. **Assurance is not complacency**, 1Cor. 15:57-58, note "therefore".

Judgement of the righteous and the unrighteous, v12-15, c.f. Dan. 12:1-2.

- **Righteous**, v12. It is difficult to be certain whether v12-15 only refers to judgement on the unrighteous. **There is a strong case for seeing v12 as the judgement of the righteous**, preceding the final judgement in v13-15. Those judged are said to be "standing before God (or the throne)", c.f. 7:9. They are called "the dead, small and great", i.e. those who have lived and died and have been part of the first resurrection, v4-6, now facing the judgement seat of Christ, 2Cor.5:9-11. It is in this context that mention is made of the Book of Life, v12, c.f. v15, followed by reference to the other books that relate to their works, v12.

Certainly the Bible makes it clear that **the righteous will be judged according to their works, not for salvation but for reward or loss**, Rev. 2: 8-11, 11:18, 14:13, 22:12, Matt. 10:42, 16:27, Rom. 14:9-13, 1Cor. 3:12-15, 2Cor. 5:9-10, 1Peter 1:15-17. **The second death has no power over the saints**, v6.

- **Unrighteous**, v13-15. **This appears to be a separate stage of judgement following a second resurrection** - although not called this as it is **the prelude to eternal death**.

The dead are "delivered up" from the sea and from Death and Hades. The sea is a metaphor for evil, c.f. Dan. 7:2-3, Rev. 13:1, a place of threat and chaos and danger and monstrous evil, Isaiah 27:1. Death and Hades represent the state of the curse, Gen. 2:17, 3:17-19, and corruption, 1Cor. 15:42-43, the victory of sin over God's creation, 1Cor. 15:55.

Hades/Sheol were names for the place of departed spirits (also termed "the pit", mirroring the physical burial of the body, Job 17:13-16, 33:23-30, Psalm 28:1, 30:2-3), Isaiah 14:4, 9-15, Psalm 16:9-11 (a Messianic Psalm, Acts 2:22-33). It was a temporary prison while awaiting judgement, 2Pet. 2:4-11, especially vv4 and 9.

The unrighteous are also judged "according to their works", (presumably also in relation to the books). Note "each one". In their case there is no corresponding appeal to the Book of Life in relation to salvation.

Death and Hades have no further role and are consigned to the lake of fire - the final defeat of these ancient enemies of mankind and all God's purposes for life in His creation. This is the last enemy to be destroyed by the Messiah, 1Cor. 15: 54-55, as He delivers the completely restored Kingdom, the resurrected, purified, and perfected saints, to the Father, 15:20-26. There will be no more death, Isaiah 25:8, Rev. 21:4.

The second death, v13-14, (the first one being physical death, Gen. 3:19, 1Cor. 15:21, Heb. 9:27). **This is an uncomfortable truth that is found in other parts of Scripture as well, including the teaching of Jesus.**

Unbelievers join their chosen masters in the lake of fire. This term was first used in 19:20 in connection with the two beasts. There was no explanation . c.f. the sudden appearance of the beast in 11:7 and Babylon in 14:8. Both of these have a foreshadowing in the Scriptures so we should expect the same to apply here.

- . **Sodom and Gomorrah**, Gen. 19:24, Luke 17:29, "rained fire and brimstone".
- **Daniel. The blazing fire from God's throne**, 7:9-10, and the fiery judgement on the final beast, 7:11.
- **Gehenna**, the valley of Hinnom to the south of Jerusalem, where rubbish was burned and where child sacrifice was carried out, 2Chron. 28:3, 33:6. **God turned it into a place of judgement**, Jer. 7:30-33, c.f. Isaiah 66:24 and vv15-16, in relation to the enemies of Zion, c.f. Zech 14:12. **Jesus reapplied the description** in Mark 9:42-48; see also Matt. 18:8-9, 13:30, 39-42, 25:40-41, 46.

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The vexed question remains, -"Does this passage in Revelation, and others of a similar nature, teach eternal punishment involving unending torment ?"

In relation to the unrighteous the last sentence of verse 10, "and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever", does not appear in v15, or in 21:8, and there is no explicit time frame in the passages listed in the paragraph above (under "Gehenna");. However, Rev. 14:9-11 does use very strong language to describe the fate of those who receive the mark of the beast, "the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever ... no rest day or night ..."

This seems conclusive but the Hebrew understanding of the words "forever and ever" is less precise - "ages to ages". Jeremiah 17:4 uses the word translated "forever" in a context where it cannot mean "eternal" as it refers to the exile. It occurs similarly in Isaiah 34: 10, describing the fate of Edom (.read the whole chapter). In these contexts the words cannot mean "unending" , but the process described is fierce and the resulting destruction complete and permanent and irrevocable -. This historical situation acts as a prophetic foreshadowing of events at the end of the age, Isaiah 34:4, c.f. Rev. 6:14, Isaiah 63:1-6.

There a degree of ambiguity in answering the question but it remains the fact that there will be a final and fearsome judgement for those who are not found written in the Book of Life. At the very least they will experience a fiery judgement of unimaginable proportions and consciously know that the choices they have made have been false and will cut them off forever from the eternal bliss of those who have faithfully followed the Lamb, 14:12-13. Even if the process of judgement is limited in time, the consequences are eternal.

The New Heaven and New Earth introduced, 20:1

"Now I saw..." This must be one of the greatest understatements of all time "a new heaven and a new earth!", Isaiah:65:17, 66:22 .

There is no description or detail; we do not know what John saw but it must have been marvellous and astounding. The statement echoes Gen.. 1:1 and marks the completion of the whole story of the Bible - from

creation to new creation. Now it is not just the heavens but Heaven itself that is re-created. The following visions emphasize the new close unity of earth and heaven.

"For the first heaven and the first earth had passed away." c.f. 20:11 **This is also very understated. Jesus affirmed this event**, Mark 13:30, **Peter described it more graphically**, 2Peter 3:10-13. Evidently there will be a fresh new creation rather than a renewal of the old, as will have happened in the Messianic Kingdom. How the transition will take place is not described. John noticed **something** missing - the sea. This suggests that he was seeing a symbolic representation of the new heaven and earth; we have already thought about the use of the sea as symbol in Scripture; for John it also symbolized his imprisonment, 1:9.

The New Jerusalem introduced, 20:2.

"Then I, John, saw..." There is a sense of immense privilege in having been given this vision. It is the consummation of the unfolding plan of God in all of world history. The holy city, New Jerusalem, comes down from Heaven. It is not a human creation, a humanist Utopia, but is the work of God Himself. It happens in the context of a new pristine creation from the hand of God.

We have seen the people of God characterised as churches (communities of faithful believing people), **lamps, saints** (holy ones), **the bride** of the Lamb, **and now as a city**, v9. **Holiness is a common feature and, like the bride**, the city is prepared and beautiful for it is to be the place where God and His people dwell together, v3. It is the heavenly Jerusalem of Gal. 4:26 and the Zion of Heb. 12:22-24, the heavenly reality that was symbolized by earthly Jerusalem, the city of the Great King, Psalm 48.

The symbolism is complex - it is both a place where God dwells with His people, v3, and is also the people of God themselves, the bride of the Messiah; He who dwells with us also dwells in us.

The New Heaven and Earth, 21:3-8

An angel proclaims aloud that the new age has begun, v3-4 - "for the former things have passed away".

God has now accomplished His eternal purpose - to live among a people who are in perfect relationship and harmony with Him. He made mankind in His image and placed them on the earth as custodians of His creation. He walked with them in the Garden and gave them the dignity of choice, for He desired love and loyalty, freely given, in response to His abundant blessing. When they chose to rebel they were excluded from His holy presence but with the promise of the Seed ringing in their ears.

The rest of the Bible tells the story of God's unfolding strategy to restore the broken relationship and once again live with and among His people within a new creation. Here are some of the milestones on the journey:

- The call of Abraham and the creation of a chosen people, to and through whom He would reveal Himself.
- Redemption from Egypt and His Covenant with Israel to be their God and to dwell among them.
- Tabernacle/Temple worship and the pilgrim feasts as models of a community gathered around their God and King.
- The failure of Israel to live up to their high calling as the servant of the Lord focussed the prophetic hope on the Messiah, son of David, who would accomplish God's purposes.
- Jesus came as man. He was the tabernacle/temple of God on earth, walking and living among us.
- Through His death and resurrection we can approach God in the heavenly tabernacle/ temple.
- The Holy Spirit is God's presence living in us - His temple on earth. We are a new creation, 2Cor. 5:17. but not yet complete
- The final stage is God coming down to dwell with and among His people in a renewed creation where heaven and earth have come together in an indivisible unity.

There is a very extensive background to this in the prophetic Scriptures, particularly in Isaiah 65: 16-25 and chapter 66- but also in many other places. There are **multiple layers of restoration** and these are **often blended in the same Scripture** - restoration of Israel from exile or at the end of the age, the Kingdom inaugurated when Jesus came, the descent of the Spirit, spiritual restoration (new creation) by new birth, intimacy with God through Jesus and the Holy Spirit, the earthly reign of Jesus as King.

A preliminary and more partial restoration acts as a prophetic sign of a later and more comprehensive one, culminating in the new heaven and earth and the New Jerusalem. Verse 3 is an example of this - Exodus 25:8, c.f. Lev 26:11-12; 2Chron. 6:18, 41, 7:1-3; John 1:14; 2Cor. 6:16-7:1.

- **The presence of God**, v3.

"Behold" - a wondrous spectacle is revealed. **"The tabernacle (dwelling/Shekinah) of God is with men, and He will dwell (tabernacle/Shekinah) among them"**. It was modelled in the Exodus story, Exodus 25:8, 29:42-46, 33:1-4, 12-17, Lev. 26:11-2, and from the time of the exile became the prophetic hope, Ezek. 37:26-28, Zech. 2:10.

It could only be realized in a limited way in this age. Jesus was, for a short time and in a limited space, the **Shekinah incarnate**, John 1:14. In a spiritual sense **the people of God**, as the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit, 1Cor. 6:19-20, **are the dwelling place of God**, 2Cor. 6:16-7:1, but **the full experience** of the tangible presence of God, dwelling among His people **will only happen in the new age, in the new heaven and the new earth**. The indwelling Spirit bears witness to the glory that will be revealed, Rom. 5:5, 1Cor. 2:6-10, Eph. 1:13-14.

"And they shall be His people(s). God Himself will be with them and be their God", Jeremiah 31:33, Zech. 2:11, 8:7-8. These blessings flow from His presence, including the full unity of all God's people from all kinds of backgrounds, 5:9, 7:9. The ancient ambition, to be god, Gen. 3:5, has gone forever. They will live forever as redeemed creatures, happy and content in His presence.

- **The absence of pain and sorrow**, v4. **Why? "For the former things have passed away"**. A

previous vision was prophetic of this, 7:9-17. Now it is fully realized in the new creation. Death is no more, 20:14; it belonged to the old order, Gen. 3:19. Sorrow, crying, and pain are also gone, including suffering, persecution, and martyrdom, Isaiah 51:11.

This is a beautiful metaphor; Jesus shared the sorrow and tears of His followers on earth, Isaiah 53:3, John 11:33, 35, **"God will wipe the tears away"**. Against all appearances, it has been worthwhile to persevere and remain faithful. The prophetic hope has been fulfilled, Isaiah 51:11, 65:19. The groaning that we share with the whole broken creation is silenced forever, Rom. 8:18-25. The promises to the overcomers have come to pass, 2:7, 11, 17, 26-28, 3:5, 12, 21.

God Himself proclaims that the New Age has arrived and gives His personal guarantee, v5-8

- **The words of the One Who sat upon the throne - "Behold, I am making all things new"**

There is no intermediary; it is the free action of the Sovereign of the Universe, and it is an act of creation that parallels Gen. 1, c.f. Isaiah 43:19, 65:17. It is no mere renovation of what has already existed.

- **The words are faithful and true because spoken by the One Who is True and Faithful**, 1:5, 3:7, 14, 6:10, 15:3, 16:7, 19:2, 11. **God's character is the foundation for everything, including the age to come**, c.f. Heb.6:13-20, 2Cor. 1:18-22.

The emphasis, from the beginning to the end of Revelation, on writing and books is very much in line with this, 1:3, 11, 19, 14:13, 19:9, 20:12, 22:10, 18. God's statements and promises are guaranteed by His character and can be recorded for all time - His word is true and reliable.

- **"It is done"**. **God has brought the entire course of history to His appointed end. Jesus' cry from the cross**, John 19:30, **signalled the completion of the work of redemption and the defeat of sin and satan. The loud voice from the temple in heaven signalled the final act preceding the coming of the Messiah as Judge**, 16:17. There and in 12:6 it is literally "They are done", i.e. all the events of history, now involving the new creation itself. Everything that God ever intended is now an accomplished fact.

- **"I am the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End". He is the source and the completion of all things**, " Rev. 4:8: 11, Gen. 1:1, John 1:1-3, Col.1:12-17. Revelation begins and ends with these titles, 1:1:8, 17 and 21.; 22:13. It is for this reason that everything else is secure. He is sovereign and nothing can prevent His will coming to pass, Isaiah 41:4, 44:6, 48:12-13. This is the confidence of His people in trouble, temptation, and suffering.

- **"I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts"**. This promise of physical and spiritual satisfaction - the physical acting as a metaphor for the deep seated human longing for meaning and identity, 1Cor. 10:1-4, John 4:13-14. Many false trails are followed in the unending quest, Jer. 2:10-13, 17-18 (Egypt). We are creatures and the thirst of the human heart can only be quenched in relationship with God, Isaiah 12:3, (wells of salvation) 35:5-7, (waters in the desert, streams in the wilderness), 41:17-18, (rivers, fountains, pool, springs), 44:3-5, (water upon the thirsty - My Spirit) 49:9-10, (springs of water), 55:1, (everyone who thirsts), Psalm 23:2, 36:7-9, 42:1-3, 46:4-5, Joel 3:18, Rev.

22:17 . **Jesus is the source of living water**, John 4:10-15, 7:37-39, Rev. 7:17. He experienced physical and soul thirst in order to release that fountain of life - the Spirit - to us, John 19:28.

- **"He who overcomes shall inherit all things and I will be his God and he shall be my son". Note the condition.**

This was the conclusion to the letter to each church in chapters 2 and 3 and a major theme throughout the series of visions, 12:11, with emphasis on perseverance, loyalty, and faithfulness, even to the point of death. "All things" includes all the individual promises to the seven churches, and everything promised in all of Scripture, Col. 1:12, Eph. 1:3-14, 1Pet. 1:3-5 etc. **We will inherit all things as sons of God. We are already children of God, by new birth**, John 1:12-13, 1Pet. 1:22-23, and by adoption, Gal. 4:4-7. The full experience of this will finally be realized in our new bodies in the new creation, Rom. 8:22-23.

- **A warning to the cowardly and wicked. "They shall have their part in the lake of fire and brimstone, which is the second death"**. There are only two categories, the overcomers and the cowardly/wicked. We have a tendency to introduce a third one. God is speaking in the "prophetic present tense" in this vision, as if the new creation has already come, but He is simultaneously issuing a warning to His creatures, still living in the present age. The forms of wickedness have been described in earlier visions.

It is clear from other parts of the Bible that failure to repent and resist sin is evidence that there is an absence of true and saving faith, regardless of profession, 1Cor. 6:9-10, Eph. 5:5-7 c.f.2:1-3, Heb. 3:6, 12-14, 4:1-2, 11-13, 10:26-31, James 5:19-20, 2Peter 2:20-22, 1John 2:15-17, 3:4-10. It is striking that the first item listed is "the cowardly"; this is in keeping with the central theme of where our ultimate and most important loyalty lies, 12:11. This is the touchstone and determining factor in all our behaviour.