

The Next Life

Two Judgments

Revelation 20:11-15; 1 Corinthians 3:10-15

Introduction

Today we will look at one of the most sought-out themes in the biblical view of the afterlife—God's final judgment. It's a theme that directly collides with the mindset of our current American culture. Decades of existentialist thinking, which rejects the existence/importance of the next life, have continually influenced American lifestyles.

We are a hedonistic society, influenced, in part, by views like those of Bertrand Russel, who said, "No fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life from the grave . . . (Therefore) it remains only to cherish, ere yet the blow falls, the lofty thoughts that ennoble his little day." Merchants saturate their commercials with the theme of living in the moment. Jennifer Lopez tells her audience they can "Live it Up" by shopping at Kohls. The prevailing theme of our day is, "We have only this life, and we are ultimately accountable to no one but ourselves for how we spend it."

However, the Bible teaches that this life is not all there. This life is but a brief time to prepare for the next life. The Bible teaches that we are accountable to God for how we live our lives. God will render a final verdict on how we live this life, and His ruling will determine our eternal destiny. The prophet Amos wisely instructed the people to "Prepare to meet your God" (Amos 4:12). If you listen to Amos, it radically changes the way you approach this life.

Daniel Webster once said, "The greatest thought that has ever entered my mind is that one day I will . . . stand before a holy God and give an account of my life."

John Wesley said, "I keep both heaven and hell ever in my eye, while I stand on this isthmus of life, between these two boundless oceans; and I (truly) think the daily consideration of both highly becomes all men of reason and religion."

As we study the Bible, we learn about two distinct judgments and that all of us will give an account to God at one of these judgments. Let's look at two different passages that describe these two judgments.

I. THE GREAT WHITE THRONE

First, the Great White Throne Judgement.

Revelation 20 contains the most detailed account of this judgment. Verse 11 says, "And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them. 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. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works. And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire." (Revelation 20:11-15)

There are several things we learn in these verses about the Great White Throne judgment. First, "the dead" refers to those condemned to this judgment; it doesn't refer to all of humanity. There is no mention of anyone present entering God's eternal kingdom at this judgment. The picture shows a judge pronouncing a guilty verdict at a criminal trial.

Believers are not a part of this judgment. Verse 6 says, "Blessed and holy *is* he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ and shall reign with him a thousand years." (Revelation 20:6)

The powerful and the weak, all those who are guilty of refusing Christ, will stand before God, the Righteous Judge to receive His verdict. John calls physical death the "first death." "The second death" is the execution of the sentence given at the Great White Throne Judgment. The "second death" guarantees the dead will spend eternity in the "lake of fire." Or "hell."

Some say the descriptions of hell in the New Testament are symbolic and figurative, but even if that's true, they convey a literal reality of anguish of eternal separation from God. In Mathew 13, Jesus says, "So shall it be at the end of the world: the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the just, And shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth." (Matthew 13:49-50)

Weeping – Regret for blowing it. Wailing – Pleading for another chance. Gnashing of teeth – Railing on God for being unfair. In this life, there are always other chances, but at the judgment, there is only everlasting regret at having permanently blown the opportunity to receive God's forgiveness.

Physically the "Lake of fire," or "Gehenna," was Jerusalem's burning dump site. The "smoke of their torment" probably refers to the anguish of their torment. Just as the saved receive new bodies suitable for experiencing an eternity of God's infinite kindness, the damned receive new bodies appropriate for experiencing God's infinite wrath.

"Outer darkness" and "bottomless pit" probably remind us of the terrible isolation of the dead. "Hell" and "the Lake of Fire" will be devoid of God's love and grace and all the comfort of relationships. There will be no intervention or limitation of Satan's hatred. The damned will plunge deeper and deeper into the abyss of their own depravity.

"What terrible crime must a person commit to incur such a punishment?" Barna research shows that 82 percent of Americans believe in an afterlife that includes both heaven and hell, but only 4 percent of those people believe that they will go to hell. Most believers think that only those who have committed murder, rape, or some heinous crime will go to hell.

But this is not the biblical view. The "books" referred to in verse 12 contain the record of each person's deeds. Each person will have his deeds examined in the light of God's perfect righteousness, and compared to God's righteousness, no one can be saved. Everyone has sinned and will be found guilty. Those who violate it most flagrantly will receive greater condemnation (Matt. 23:14)—but everyone guilty of violations will be sentenced (Matt. 5:22-30).

All sin is cosmic treason, a rejection of God's moral authority, and deserving of his wrath. But there is another, more tragic reason why these people are condemned. Their names are not recorded in "the book of life" (20:15).

"The Book of Life" is the record of those who have received God's offer of salvation through Jesus Christ (3:5; 1 Jn. 5:5). The amazing thing is not that God condemns us but that he offers to pardon us and has paid for this pardon with the price of his own Son's blood. Jesus came to live the life of perfect obedience that we owe God. He came to face the cross and the judgment we deserve for our disobedience.

God has graciously extended this offer to you, sent his people to share it with you, and convicted you of your need for Christ's forgiveness. All you have to do is acknowledge your guilt and humbly put your trust in Jesus. Jesus pardons you from God's judgment and welcomes you into eternal life (Jn. 5:24). But if you willfully reject Christ's offer, you can't say God sends you to hell—you send yourself to hell by rejecting his merciful provision!

But what about the people who never heard the gospel? —the infants, those with developmental disabilities, the people without the Bible?" Suffice it to say that God will deal with them fairly and mercifully. But you have heard and understood his offer, and you are responsible!

If you have not received this offer, I implore you to receive it now. Get this issue settled! Admit your guilt before God, and ask Christ to give you God's forgiveness and love. Jesus will cleanse you, change your life, and save you eternally!

If you have received Christ's offer, rejoice that your name is recorded in the book of life! In your lowest moments in this life, remember that you are spared from eternal condemnation and have the hope of eternal life. Believers will not face God's condemnation or the eternal death that awaits the unbelieving.

But we will face the judgment of Christ in a different but still important way. The second judgment is called the "Bema," or the "Judgment Seat of Christ."

II. THE "BEMA"

1 Corinthians 3 gives us the most detailed account of "The Judgment Seat of Christ. Verse 10 says, "According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise master builder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon. For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire." (1 Corinthians 3:10-15)

Notice the difference between this judgment and the Great White Throne judgment. At the GWT, only non-Christians are judged. Only Christians are judged at the Judgment Seat of Christ (vs. 16,23). The outcome of the GWT judgment is just that; God's judgment. But, the result of this judgment is God's reward.

According to verse 14, the issue is not salvation or no salvation—but reward or loss of reward, and greater or lesser reward. 2 Corinthians 5:10 says, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things *done* in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad." (2 Corinthians 5:10 NKJV)

Romans 14:10 says, "But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ." (Romans 14:10 NKJV)

During the Grecian Games, the "judgment seat" was where the judges were seated. After the contestants finished their event, they appeared before the "judgment seat." The judges then gave out rewards for the top contestants; however, they did not execute the ones who lost, thankfully!

So, what is our reward? Well, it's clearly something in addition to the gift of eternal life that we receive, given to all who trust Christ. Scripture shows us two main features of this reward. One is the praise we receive from God for pleasing him.

1 Corinthians 4:5," Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one's praise will come from God." (1 Corinthians 4:5 NKJV)
In the parable of the talents in Matthew 25:21, Jesus says, "His lord said to him, 'Well *done*, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.' He also who had received two talents came and said, 'Lord, you delivered to me two talents; look, I have gained two more talents besides them.' His lord said to him, 'Well *done*, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler

over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.' (Matthew 25:21-23 NKJV)

That is staggering grace—that the God of the universe, the One to whom praise is rightfully due, will not only allow us to spend eternity in his presence but will also praise us! Christ has also chosen us to rule and reign with him. We will have roles of authority in the kingdom of God.

Christ's kingdom will be free from all imperfection and sadness. There will be purpose, progress, accomplishment, and responsibility in that kingdom. Every believer will have a role in this kingdom which will be determined based on our faithfulness to God's purposes in this life.

In Luke 19:17 Jesus said, "A certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and to return. So he called ten of his servants, delivered to them ten minas, and said to them, 'Do business till I come.' But his citizens hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, 'We will not have this *man* to reign over us.' "And so it was that when he returned, having received the kingdom, he then commanded these servants, to whom he had given the money, to be called to him, that he might know how much every man had gained by trading. Then came the first, saying, 'Master, your mina has earned ten minas.' And he said to him, 'Well done, good servant; because you were faithful in a very little, have authority over ten cities.' (Luke 19:12-17 NKJV)

The basis for condemnation at the GWT is sin and unrepentance, but the basis for the reward at The Judgment Seat of Christ is "the quality of each person's work" for Christ in this life. The metaphor here and other passages make it clear that the issue is what we do with our lives in this life once we come to Christ.

Building with "wood, hay, and straw" indicates activities and accomplishments that do not advance Christ's purposes, have no enduring quality, and will not be rewarded. Building with "gold, silver and precious stones" signifies activities and accomplishments that advance Christ's purposes and are therefore enduring in quality and will be rewarded.

Conclusion

Every one of us is headed to one of these judgments, and all of us are helping others to one of these two eternal destinies.

C.S. Lewis wrote in "The Weight of Glory," "Nothing is so obvious in a child . . . as its great and undisguised pleasure in being praised (by his parents or teacher) . . . (to have) the satisfaction of having pleased those whom he has rightly loved and (respected) . . . And that is enough to raise our thoughts to what may happen when (we), beyond all hope and nearly beyond belief, at last learn that (we have) pleased him whom (we were) created to please. (We) will be free from the miserable illusion that it was (our) doing. With no taint of . . . (prideful) self-approval (we) will most innocently rejoice in the thing that God has made (us) to be

. . . (This) moment will forever drown (both our) inferiority complex (and our) pride . . . If God is satisfied with the work, the work may be satisfied with itself . . . To please God . . . to be a real ingredient in the divine happiness . . . to be loved by God, not merely pitied, but delighted in as an artist delights in his work or a father in a son - it seems impossible, a weight of glory which our thoughts can barely sustain. But so it is." (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1974), pp. 9,10

Scripture gives us a good reason not to judge one another. We will all stand before God's judgment seat and give an account of ourselves to God. None of us are qualified to be the Judge. Only the Lord Jesus is qualified, and the Godhead trusts Him with all judgment.

We need to remember that because we will all stand some day before the judgment seat of Christ.