

Sermon – 22/06/2008 pm

Great White Throne

Study Text: Revelation 20:11-15

Sin has corrupted the human heart in many ways, not the least of which is our attitude towards judgment. We are pleased to see others punished for wrongdoing but will not accept such punishment ourselves. A young swimmer, who smashed the face of a friend, presumably because he said or did something to offend him, is not willing to accept just punishment for his violent attack. He has spent thousands of dollars trying every avenue of appeal because he thinks he has been treated unjustly.

Jesus put it very succinctly when he said *why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye but do not consider the log in your own* (Matthew 7:3). We have no problem seeing the faults of others and condemning them, but are not ready to examine our own hearts and see our own faults. We all have this inherent sense of justice, as seen in the child saying 'it's not fair', but fail to see that we condemn ourselves by doing the same thing. Paul points this out in his letter to the Romans and concludes that on this basis God justly condemns us all (Romans 2:1-3).

God will render to each one according to their deeds. God is totally just. God knows the truth about one of us – even the secrets of our heart. And on judgment day he will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ according to the gospel (Romans 2:16). Are you ready for such judgment? Can you escape divine condemnation? If so how?

Setting the Scene

John had a vision of judgment day which he tells us about in this passage of Revelation. He *saw a great white throne and him who sat on it* (20:11). He saw dead people standing before the throne and books being opened. He saw judgment being given and those whose names were not found in the book of life being thrown into the lake of fire (20:15).

Daniel had a similar vision. He saw the Ancient of Days sitting on a fiery throne. Thousands upon thousands stood before the throne. *The court was seated and the books were opened* (Daniel 7:10). In a later vision he saw even more clearly the dead being raised, some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt (Daniel 12:2). He was told that what he saw was a vision of the time of the end. The Day of Judgment is referred to throughout Scripture.

Some refer to this 'great white throne judgment' as just one of God's judgments. Dispensationalists call it the 'great white throne judgment' because they see it as distinct from other judgments. They claim there is a judgment of the nations in Matthew 25, a judgment which decides which nations will enter the millennial kingdom. Then comes the judgment of believers before Christ in heaven, a judgment to receive rewards as in II Corinthians 5:10. This 'great white throne judgment' they say is of unbelievers only. Such an interpretation is a case of fitting Scripture into a predetermined scheme rather than interpreting Scripture by other Scripture, as commended by the Westminster Confession of Faith 1:9 .

There is nothing in Scripture which points to multiple judgments. On the contrary, in John 5 Jesus says that the hour is coming when **all** who are in their graves will hear his voice and

come forth. They will rise to face final judgment, divine judgment. What about those who are still living on this day? Paul deals with that question in 1 Thessalonians 4 (the ‘rapture’ passage). Jesus said *as I hear I judge and my judgment is righteous* (John 5:30). This is the final judgment at which the eternal destiny of all people is determined.

What Jesus said accords with what John saw in this vision – and what Daniel saw also. They saw a throne. What does a throne symbolise? A king sits on a throne. He does so for coronation but also for making pronouncements. Pilate, as the king’s representative, sat on a judgment seat to hear the case against Jesus and make his judgment (Matthew 27:19).

The throne John saw is great and white. White is the colour of purity and holiness. There will be no mistakes and no corruption in the judgments made from this throne. Moreover, this is the highest court in the universe. There will be no appeals to a higher court for there are no higher courts.

Who is sitting on the throne? No name is given in this passage – nor is a name given in chapter 4 or Daniel 7. But the description of majesty and glory in Daniel and Revelation 4 obviously point to God. So it is in this vision. In fact earth and heaven fled from his presence. Who but the Lord God who created the earth and heavens could command them to flee away?

The present earth is corrupted because of sin. It must pass away before the new earth and new heaven can come (21:1). Some speak about a restoration and renewal of the earth but we read here that it fled away and no place was found for it.

John saw Jesus in the midst of the throne in heaven (5:6). God has committed all judgment to the Son (John 5:22) and Jesus spoke of sitting on a throne judging the nations when he comes again in his glory (Matthew 25:31). ‘I and my Father are one’ said Jesus, and so it is in the judgment. Jesus is on the throne with the Father and judging according to the will of his Father.

Second Resurrection

John saw the dead standing before the throne. They were small and great. This description was used when referring to the saints worshipping God (11:18, 19:5), but there is nothing intrinsic in the term to limit it to the saints – or to unbelievers. Rather, it is an inclusive term referring to all the dead, believers and unbelievers. Dispensationalists have to limit it to unbelievers because they say believers were bodily raised 1000 years previously.

We might call this the second resurrection in contrast to the first resurrection (20:5). It is a bodily resurrection. The first resurrection referred to believers being raised with Christ to live and reign with him during the millennium or church age. *The rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished* (20:5). John saw this time. The throne of God appeared with the coming of the Lord (21:5). All the dead, small and great, those lost at sea, those buried in the earth and those cremated, will be raised from the grave to stand before the great white throne.

It will be a case of ‘this is your life’, without any editing. It is amazing how men and women can write such glowing reports of their lives. One wonders if there is an honest CV anywhere in the world. Even when people have done evil they can make themselves look good. Recently one politician even drafted an apology to himself to make himself look good. But before the throne of God there will be no cover up. CV’s, glowing reference letters and self-written apologies will be of no value. God knows the truth about us all.

Each and every human being will be judged according to their works, by what is written in the books (20:12). People get concerned about invasion of their privacy. They get worried at what the government and banks know about them. But what God knows about them should be of much greater concern for God knows everything, even the secret things. And God will render to each according to his deeds (Psalm 62:12, Proverbs 24:12, Romans 2:6).

All who seek to be saved by good works understand this. They want their good deeds to outweigh their bad deeds. But such thinking is twisted. Good deeds do not cancel bad deeds. The Bible says that just one bad deed brings condemnation before God (James 2:10), and it is God's judgment that we must be concerned about. Many think they will be judged by their peers or some benevolent old man in the sky. God is holy. God will not accept even the slightest blemish on offerings made to him.

Standing before the judgment seat it will be patently obvious that the record of your deeds will only serve to condemn you. But see! There is another book, the book of life (20:12). This book is spoken of by Moses (Exodus 32:32) Daniel (12:2) and Paul (Philippians 4:3). Jesus told his disciples that their names were written in heaven (Luke 10:20).

What do we know about this book of life? It is the Lamb's book of life (21:27). It is a book associated with the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. Lamb refers to sacrifice, so the names in this book are linked to the sacrifice of Jesus. Indeed, the names in this book are of those who have believed that Jesus died to take away their sin, that in his blood they have been washed from their sins.

Second Death

John does not see what happens to those whose names are written in the book of life – at least not in this vision. What he saw was the fate of those whose names were not written in this book. *Anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire (20:15 cf. 13:8, 17:8)*. The lake of fire is where Satan, the beast and the false prophet were being tormented day and night (20:10). Human beings who choose to reject Christ and follow Satan now find themselves in this same lake of fire suffering eternal torment. Even those who live relatively good lives will be there if their names are not in the Book of Life.

This is the second death. Those who think that their physical death will be the end are in for a terrible awakening. For they will rise from the dead to face divine judgment before being cast into the lake of fire which is the second death. This second death will be forever and ever, it will be torment, weeping and gnashing of teeth forever and ever. The fact of the last judgment should provoke us to bring the gospel to all people, warning them to repent of their sin and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Finally Death and Hades, the place of the departed, will be cast into the lake of fire (20:14). This may refer to the occupants of this place, or the place itself. With the occupants all risen and judged there is no more place for Death and Hades anyway. In his death and resurrection Jesus defeated death and the devil. On his return death itself will be destroyed. Unbelievers will be consigned to the lake of fire and believers will be with Christ forever. With Christ in the new heaven and new earth there will be no more death, no more sorrow nor crying nor pain (21:4).

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