

Settle Out of Court!

Is Hell for Real? – Part I

Revelation 20:11-13

Introduction

In our last session I reviewed the material relative to the one-thousand-year-reign, also known as the millennial kingdom. My desire was to clear up some misunderstandings and answer a few more questions that I have received over the last few weeks.

I want to be clear about this. Sometimes, especially in matters of eschatology – future events – it is difficult to deliver the truth clearly.

The following email that a mother sent to me this past week is a case in point:

My younger son spent Saturday night at a friend's house and went to church with them on Sunday. [When he got home] over dinner we were discussing what you had covered Sunday morning. In giving him an overview, I mentioned the millennial kingdom. He said, "Oh yeah, that's when we're gonna have a thousand years of rain."

She then wrote, "I guess the good news is that he was listening."

We are about to dive into another subject that has raised more questions and objections over the centuries than perhaps any other biblical topic.

In a recent issue of the *News and Observer*, there was an interesting article in the "Faith" section of this newspaper. Several in our fellowship sent a copy to me, and I am grateful.

The "Faith" section of the *News and Observer* really should be called the "Give It Your Best Guess" section because it has little to do with objective

biblical truth, and certainly does not represent true faith in Christ.

This particular article ran under the headline, "It's God's Job, Not Ours, to Give Out Salvation Tickets".

I agree with this – we cannot give anyone a salvation ticket. However, we can tell them how to pick one up.

In this article, the author took issue with someone who challenged him with the text of John 14:6 and the truth that heaven is only for those who come to faith in Jesus Christ. The contributor wrote (I will give an edited version), "Worshiping anyone other than Jesus Christ is teaching false doctrine that [effectively means they will] spend eternity in hell. I know this isn't a popular view, but it's the biblical truth."

The journalist, a member of the "God Squad" – which I guess means he represents God – wrote this answer in the *News and Observer*, "I appreciate the power of your faith, but it isn't compassionate . . . I can't believe Gandhi is rotting in hell."

He goes on to explain that God will let all the virtuous people into heaven, even though they have denied Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. He used as an example a Buddhist monk who has denied salvation through Christ, but is still considered by God to be an "anonymous Christian".

This phrase came from a Jesuit scholar. It is not found in the Bible.

The journalist went on to explain that "anonymous Christians" are people who, even though they rejected Christ throughout their lives, will get

into heaven because they were good people. Evidently they were Christians, but simply did not know it until the time arrived that they had to.

He then rebuked the writer who had dared to suggest Christ's words in John 14:6. In this verse, Christ said,

... "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through Me."

The journalist wrote to the contributor, in print, *It's not your job to tell people they are damned. God didn't put you in charge of dispensing salvation tickets. God put you on earth to witness to your faith by keeping your heart open and your mouth shut.*ⁱ

What kind of neighbor sees a house going up in flames across the street and says, "God would rather me keep my mouth shut. But I'll tell you what, I'll go over and mow their lawn – that'll demonstrate my faith."?!

The fundamental issue behind this journalist's kind of advice is the belief that a literal hell does not exist, or if it does, only the really bad people in the world are going there. Hell is a place for the devil, demons, and really bad people like Hitler, Stalin, and Attila the Hun.

The problem with this belief is that Jesus Christ said hell is a place not only for bad people, but religious, moral, and upstanding people (Romans chapter 2). In fact, Jesus Christ made it very clear that no one can enter heaven unless they have been born again, or spiritually made alive by the power of the Spirit of God through salvation (John chapter 3).

I found it interesting that this journalist, in his response, completely ignored Jesus Christ's own words in John 14:6.

My friend, you cannot ignore Christ's words.

Jesus said earlier in John 10:9,

"I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved . . ."

This makes Jesus Christ a liar, a lunatic, or truly Lord.

C. S. Lewis called this the great "trilemma" – Christ was either:

- a liar; that is, He made stuff up;
- a lunatic; that is, He had a huge Messiah complex and was deceived by His own sense of grandeur;

- truly the Son of God and the coming Lord of the universe.

Why do people throughout our culture, like this newspaper journalist, flirt with the vocabulary of truth but deny the core meaning of Christ's claims?

They do so because there is the knotty issue created by the words of the prophets, Jesus Christ, and the apostles throughout scripture of this matter of judgment. It is the problem of a place called hell. It is the clear biblical teaching that . . .

... all the world will become accountable to God (Romans 3:19)

"Accountable to God" – the very thing the world resists, rejects, mocks, twists, denies, and redefines.

The word that is translated "accountable" is "hupodikos" (υποδικος) in Greek, which is a legal term that means "to answer to". This was used for someone who was liable for judgment and punishment.ⁱⁱ

The problem is not that Jesus Christ and the apostles were not clear. The problem is that they were very clear, but mankind does not want to hear it.

The apostle Paul is saying in this verse in Romans that there is a day coming in which all the world of unbelievers will be brought to a trial before God, and will be liable for judgment and punishment.

The next scene in John the Apostle's vision in Revelation is this very trial. The moment of mankind's accountability before God has arrived. There is so much contained in it that we are going to take two sessions to work through it.

I will attempt to answer along the way some of the objections and questions raised when we talk about hell. These include:

- What about those who never heard the gospel?
- How can God send someone to hell that never had a Bible?
- What about people in different countries who never listened to a missionary?
- Does hell really last forever for people or just for the devil?

I am going to answer these questions in our next session.

Today, I want to introduce *the* most despised doctrine of future events. It is, in fact, the most offensive, repulsive doctrine of biblical Christianity to our world.

This doctrine is that of final judgment when billions of unbelievers will be summoned to court by none other than Jesus Christ!

R. G. Lee, a preacher of old, called this day “payday”. He preached often his sermon entitled, “Payday Someday”.

According to the scene in Revelation chapter 20 verse 11, where we will pick up our study today, payday has arrived. John the Apostle informs us that the divine courtroom is about to deliver a call to order, and the great trial is about to begin.

The Great Trial

1. An Unforgettable Setting

The first thing I want to point out is the unforgettable setting. Look at Revelation 20:11.

Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them.

We are given some descriptive words for the seat of judgment.

- John says it is a *great* throne.

This word “great,” in Greek, is “megan” (μεγαν), which gives us our word “mega”.

This is a “mega” throne – an awesome, fearful, great throne because of the glory of His holy majesty surrounding it.

This is the only court ever convened by One whose jurisdiction is universal.ⁱⁱⁱ

- John informs us next that this throne is not only great, but it is *white*.

The Greek word for “white” is “leukon” (λευκον), symbolizing the absolute purity of His throne.^{iv}

In this courtroom, there is not one speck of injustice – not one hint of bribery, not one molecule of inequality, no “spin”.

David writes in Psalm 97:2b,

. . . righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne.

In other words, God’s coming verdict of punishment in an everlasting hell is actually right and just.

Mankind is about to get what it actually deserves.

People might say, “You’ve got to be kidding!”

How offensive is that? Think about it.

It is one thing for the Bible to say that someone will be thrown into hell because they were not good enough to get into heaven or they did not follow all the rules, pray all the right prayers, or join the right church. It is one thing to say that someone is not going to heaven because they do not deserve heaven.

It is an entirely different thing to say that someone is going to hell because he deserves it. It is utterly offensive to every generation to believe that hell could possibly be *deserved*.

Later on, John the Apostle will tell us why.

However, in verse 11 John informs us that this unforgettable setting involves a great white throne, and do not miss the fact that he calls it a throne.

This is not a desk for dialogue or a stool for support and advice. No, this is a throne from which will come the King’s verdict.

- John then makes reference, in verse 11, to *Him who sat upon it*.

We know from a number of verses that God the Son shares the throne at the right hand – the place of authority – of God the Father.

Revelation 22:1, 3 refers to . . .

. . . the throne of God and of the Lamb . . .

Paul wrote to the Colossians,

Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. (Colossians 3:1)

The writer of Hebrews in chapter 10 verse 12 wrote,

. . . [Christ], having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God

This is a reference to the throne now shared between God the Son and God the Father.

The apostle Peter wrote,

[Jesus Christ] is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven . . . (I Peter 3:22)

The Father and Son share the throne as equally divine, along with the Holy Spirit – God in three persons, yet one Triune God. However, they have unique functions according to their own eternal wisdom.

One of the unique functions of God the Son – Jesus Christ – is judging sinners.

Jesus said in John 5:22,

. . . not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son

Jesus Christ, then, is the Judge. By the way, this court cannot be held if the Judge is dead. The Judge is alive – resurrected and ascended.

This truth of Christ’s resurrection turned cowards into crusaders.

The apostle Peter, who a few months earlier cursed and swore to try to cover up any connection between him and the Savior, is now preaching openly and boldly. In Acts 10:42-43, after Jesus arose from the dead, Peter said,

. . . He ordered us to proclaim to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead.

Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins.

How ironic is this? God the Son has been appointed by God the Father to assume the role of Judge. The same One who was earlier the Savior who forgave sinners will be on the throne one day as Judge to condemn sinners.

Did you notice the first part of verse 42? Read it again.

. . . He [Jesus Christ] ordered us to proclaim to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead.

Was Jesus aware that His followers were not supposed to say things like this – that He was going to judge the world?

Did Jesus not know that we, as believers, were just supposed to keep our hearts open and our mouths shut?

Did Peter not know this?

It is not Jesus who is telling Christians to keep their mouths shut and not warn others of the coming, final judgment; it is Satan and his followers who say, “Keep this message to yourself!”

We are disturbing the religious status quo.

The religious leaders hauled Peter and the other disciples before the Jewish high court and commanded them to no longer deliver the message of their accountability to Jesus Christ (Acts 5:28). However, Peter and the others said,

. . . “We must obey God rather than men.” (Acts 5:29)

In other words, “We will not keep this to ourselves.”

Like the apostle Paul, they said,

. . . We will beg the unbelieving world to be reconciled to God. (II Corinthians 5:20 paraphrased)

Why? For one thing, there is a coming payday, with a court so terrifying and a verdict so terrible that we would never wish anyone to find themselves before this great white throne.

- The scene is actually made more terrifying by John’s next words in verse 11.

Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them.

There are some who believe that God does not destroy the heavens and the earth, but simply renews them to the form He wants them to be after the judgments are completed.

However, John’s vision in this verse, coupled with numerous Old and New Testament passages, including Peter’s words in II Peter 3:13, leave little doubt in my mind that the universe as we know it will be violently consumed by fire.

Peter writes,

. . . the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up.

. . . But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells.

(II Peter 3:10, 13)

Peter writes, “the elements will be destroyed”. The Greek word for “elements” is “stoixieion” (στοιχειον), which refers to the atomic particles that are the basic structures of everything that is. It will all be destroyed. The word for “destroyed” literally means “loosed”. In other words, the universe will come apart and explode as if it were one gigantic nuclear bomb.^v

Isaiah wrote,

Lift up your eyes to the sky, then look to the earth beneath; for the sky will vanish like smoke . . . (Isaiah 51:6a)

The heat from this universal explosion, of which Peter writes, will disperse all the matter in it, causing it to flee, as John writes in verse 11, from the presence of God.

It may be that although God kept His promise and destroyed the earth and the entire universe with fire, He will recall all the energy – all the atoms; all the matter – and, as He did with our glorified bodies, will reconstruct a brand new universe and, most importantly, a brand new earth.

Imagine this courtroom suspended in space. It is not taking place in heaven or on earth; there are no planets or galaxies visible. Nothing can be seen but God, the redeemed of all time seated somewhere nearby, the godly angels of heaven, and every unbelieving human being who ever lived.

The prophet Daniel also had a vision of this scene and wrote,

I kept looking until thrones were set up . . .

By the way, the plural use of “thrones” implies that Christ’s redeemed will play a role in this final judgment. If not passing sentence, at least they will be playing a role in observing and, no doubt, affirming with solemn unity the glory of God’s justice and the righteousness of His verdict.

Daniel writes,

I kept looking until thrones were set up, and the Ancient of Days took His seat; His vesture was like white snow and the hair of His head like pure wool. His throne was ablaze with flames . . .

A river of fire was flowing and coming out from before Him; thousands upon thousands were attending Him, and myriads upon myriads were standing before Him; the court sat, and the books were opened.

(Daniel 7:9-10)

We cannot even begin to imagine this scene, first witnessed by John the Apostle as he was given a tour of the future and the end of planet Earth.

This is a terrifying scene, primarily to all of humanity who observes this fiery explosion. This basically ends their sight of anything; now all is changed.

This is an unforgettable setting.

Let us look at another aspect of this great trial.

2. An Unavoidable Summons

Notice verse 12a of Revelation 20.

And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne . . .

Note verse 13a.

And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them . . .

Hades, in the Greek language, is the same place as Sheol, in the Hebrew language. It is the place where the souls of unbelievers are staying as they await their summons to the great white throne.

Hades is used ten times in the New Testament, always in reference to the place of punishment.^{vi}

John also tells us they come from “death” and “the sea”.

John is informing us that just as the bodies of all believers were resurrected in the past and given a glorified, immortal body, the bodies of all the unbelievers are now resurrected. Their souls are released from Hades – the temporary place of torment – and their souls are reunited with their reconstituted, resurrected bodies.

This means that unbelievers are now fitted with resurrection, immortal bodies that are eternally suited for hell – able to last forever in the lake of fire!^{vii}

The unbelievers stand before the throne of judgment. Not one unredeemed person is missing from this courtroom.

No matter where their body was lying; no matter how decayed or scattered their dust; even if they were buried in a grave, drowned, or had their ashes scattered upon the seas, they are summoned to this moment of reckoning. No one will be able to stay in his grave, pull the dirt over his face, and hide from God.

Those who were killed by accident or died peacefully in their sleep; those who were burned on some fiery pyre or embalmed in some Egyptian tomb; those who were laid to rest in satin-lined caskets, primitive pine boxes, or wrapped in burlap in shallow graves; those who were buried in marble vaults, surrounded by treasure, and those who were consumed by head hunters or vultures will all be raised to stand before the Judge. God knows every speck of human dust and every strand of DNA, and He calls it forth from deserts, caves, jungles, seas, tombs, ghettos, and palaces.^{viii}

John writes in these verses that “the great and the small” stand together before the great white throne.

In other words, the world’s impressive and important “movers and shakers” stand equally guilty as the world’s dropouts and drunks. The well-connected have no strings to pull. The politically savvy and the wealthy stand next to the illiterate and the homeless before this throne.

This is judgment day! There is nowhere to run; there is nowhere to hide.

You may respond, “You’re just trying to frighten me!”

Is it working? I would rather frighten you with the truth than pamper you with empty promises.

There will be no anonymous Christians in eternity. Every Buddhist and every Baptist who plays at his religion and assumes he is good enough to live with God forever is in for a rude awakening.

However, the Christian who has been brought to life by faith in Christ alone – the genuine Christian who has acted upon the grace of God and received the gift of God’s salvation – will not be standing before this great white throne, but seated around it.

The deceiver said thousands of years ago to our first parents the same message he is delivering through his world systems and worldwide religions today – “Eve, do your own thing – you won’t die. Don’t worry about the future! You have nothing to fear.”

Eve ate and Adam ate – and they became afraid, ran, and hid.

At this scene of final judgment, there is nowhere to run and nowhere to hide. It is forever too late.

With these brief phrases, the court of God’s great white throne opens. The Judge is on His throne. The condemned are summoned for their prosecution and defense. The evidence is about to be presented. The verdict will be read and the sentence delivered.

Will this be you?

The books are about to be opened as evidence – the book of conscience, the book of secrets, the book of words, the book of actions, and the book of life. The evidence will overwhelm every possible defense.

Do not demand a fair trial because you will get one.

My friend, you have only one hope – settle out of court.

Admit you are guilty and accept the justness of God’s verdict against you – you are a sinner and you are rightly and justly condemned to die an eternal death in hell.

After this, run to the cross where your Savior died for you and claim His suffering, His death, and His life as your payment and your substitute – He took what you deserved.

You can listen to the local newspaper’s religion section or to the revelation of the Revelation of John – you will either be standing before this throne one day, or seated around it.

You do not want to stand trial in this scene. So settle out of court with the One who paid your penalty, and He will set you free.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 2/21/2010 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ “It’s God’s Job, Not Ours, to Give Out Salvation Tickets,” News and Observer (Feb. 4, 2010).

ⁱⁱ Fritz Reinecker and Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 356.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sam Gordon, Worthy is the Lamb: A Walk through Revelation (Ambassador, 2000), p. 415.

^{iv} Reinecker and Rogers, p. 858.

^v John MacArthur, Revelation: Volume 2 (Moody Press, 2000), p. 250.

^{vi} Ibid., p. 252.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Gordon, p. 416.