



Part 42 – The Last Battle

Revelation 20:7-15

At his first advent, Christ established his kingdom on the earth. Even as wickedness proliferated, the kingdom of Christ advanced progressively, and has continued to do so. During this time, Satan is bound from deceiving the nations (vs. 3). That means that the light of the gospel would finally break through to the nations. This has happened in extraordinary proportions over the last 2,000 years. Satan's binding also

means that during the days of Christ's kingdom on earth, except for "a little while" (vs. 3), he is kept from organizing the nations for a last stand against the Lamb and his church.

Satan's Last Stand

Vv. 7-8 – "When the thousand years ended..." – As we have already seen, the number 1,000 is used in Scripture to indicate completeness. Christ began his reign on earth at his first advent and the completion of his atoning work. The entire church age (the period of time between Christ's two advents) encompasses his earthly reign (the 1,000 years). Christ's earthly reign is seen in the extraordinary advance of the gospel throughout the nations. Once the gospel goes out to the world to the Lord's satisfaction, then Christ will return as Judge (Matthew 24:14).

"...Satan will be released from his prison and will come out to deceive the nations..." – Having been bound during the church age, unable to stop the advance of the gospel to all nations, Satan will be unbound for a brief time and for a specific purpose. He will once again go about deceiving the nations (referred to here as "God and Magog"¹) in a last attempt to wipe out the church. It seems likely that this international conspiracy will come from a union of political power and false religion. The deceived nations will seek to use their power to stamp out the church of Jesus Christ. John saw this very thing prefigured in the vision of the sixth bowl (16:13-16) and of the rider on the white horse who destroyed those who had been gathered "for war" (19:11-21).

Vs. 9 – The dispensational view is that "the beloved city" is Jerusalem. However, it is best to see this as a symbolic reference to the people of God, the church ("the camp of the saints"). Satan's ambition is to destroy the church of Jesus Christ, not a literal city. Jesus compares his church to "a city set on a hill" (Matthew 5:14). Paul refers to the church as "the Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16).

Vs. 10 – As we have seen elsewhere, there is no description of an actual battle. But whatever the final conflict looks like and in whatever form it takes, there will be no genuine suspense when the dragon and nations attempt to destroy God's people and stamp out the gospel. The final conflict will be over before it even begins, so thorough and overwhelming will be the Lord's triumph. Satan will be cast into hell alongside the beast from the sea and the false prophet (the beast from the land). There is no expiration date on the torments of hell. Just as the new creation will be eternal, so too will Hell.

The Final Judgment

In verses 11-15, we are given more detail concerning the final judgment than was offered earlier (11:18). The time of God's merciful patience has come to an end and the time for judgment has arrived. Paul warned the philosophers in Athens that God "has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness" (Acts 17:31).

Vs. 11 – God's perfect and holy justice is depicted in the "white throne." Notice how all of creation flees from the presence of the Holy God. This harkens back to an earlier depiction of this same event in chapter 6 where John writes that "the sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up and every island and mountain was removed from its place" (vv. 14, 20). Other passages describe a great earthquake at the final judgment (chapters 6, 8, 11, 16). All of fallen creation scatters to make way for what we will see in chapters 21 and 22, a new heaven and a new earth (Acts 3:21; Romans 8:19-21; 2 Peter 3:10, 12). This fallen world, groaning to be released from its bondage to decay, flees, as it were, from the presence of the Holy Judge. In its place, God will give to his people a new creation.

¹ Ezekiel 38-39 describes Gog as a leader of a coalition of nations called "Magog" who will attack God's people.

The One seated upon the throne is God Almighty in the Person of the eternal Son. The risen and reigning Christ will be the Judge of all the earth: “For the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father” (John 5:22-23). And as Paul told the Athenians, God “will judge the world in righteousness by a man [the risen Christ] whom he has appointed” (Acts 17:31).

- For dispensationalism, the most common position is that there will be four distinct judgments: the judgment of believers at the rapture; the judgment of Israel at the end of a seven year tribulation; the judgment of the nations; and the “great white throne judgment” at the close of the millennial age.² These four different judgements are necessary in order to fit with the dispensational premillennial conception of the future. It must be pointed out that this particular view is found nowhere in church history until the latter half of the 19th century. Nor does this view comport with the simplest reading of the relevant texts.
- In contrast, given that Jesus’ return will occur at the completion of his earthly reign (“the thousand years”), there is no reason for a formula that requires more than one judgment.

“The final judgment will be a single event in which all are judged, believer and unbeliever alike, Jew as well as Gentile. Just as we have seen that the resurrection will be an event at the end of the age which embraces believer and unbeliever alike (John 5:25-29), so the final judgment will include all people...When Christ describes the final judgment in Matthew 25, all nations are judged together and the ‘sheep’ separated from the ‘goats’ (Matt. 25:31-36).”³
- Daniel prophesied: “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt” (Daniel 12:2). And Jesus confirmed that “An hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment” (John 5:28-29; see also Acts 24:15). This all affirms that there will be one judgment rather than several.

Vv. 12-13 – This is the judgment of all humanity including those who have died (vs. 13). Jesus has returned and taken his place as Judge. All those who have died have been raised up (referred to as “the general resurrection”) great and small, believing and unbelieving will come before the bar of holy justice.

“...and books were opened.” – The books here are symbolic of the record of the deeds of all humanity. I think it is safe to conclude that Jesus does not need a written record. Rather, the “books” here symbolize the meticulous and reliable nature of God’s justice. The Lord is not “winging it.” The record of all our deeds is comprehensive and accurate.

“Then another book was opened, which is the book of life” – In addition to the “books” which serve as a record of humanity’s deeds, is the book of life. Elsewhere it’s called the Lamb’s Book of Life. Revelation 21:27 says only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life will be able to enter the holy city. Revelation 17:8 says that these names were written in the book “from the foundation of the world.” These are God’s elect: those whom the Lord has chosen, regenerated, and given the gift of faith and repentance. The names in this book were recorded before any of our days came to pass.

“And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done.” – Now we return to “the books” which record the deeds of humanity; the record upon which they are judged. Every act, word, thought, and motive will be exposed (Matthew 12:36; 25:35-40; Luke 12:2-3).

Vs. 14 – “Then death and hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire.” Death is a result of the Fall. It is “the last enemy” (1 Corinthians 15:26). It makes sense that even after the devil is thrown into hell, the very last enemy to be overcome is death itself. Hades is a very similar concept. The word “Hades” is used 10 times in the New Testament. It is used, for instance, to refer to a place of torment, opposite Abraham’s side (Luke 16). Here it is more generally a reference to the netherworld, or life after death in the grave, awaiting God’s final judgment. In the grand depiction of Christ in chapter 1, the first two enemies which oppose him are death and Hades. Before Babylon or the beasts are introduced, we first meet death and Hades (1:18) which, when Christ returns, will be cast away forever.

Vs. 15 – The final words of this section are terrifying. Once again Hell is referred to as “the lake of fire.” A major feature of Jesus’ earthly ministry was his frequent warnings to his hearers concerning the coming judgment. Hell is a mystery to us in many ways. The scriptures give us very little detail. What we know is that it is a place of God’s holy wrath made for Satan and his demons. It is a place of sorrow and regret and

² *The New Scofield Reference Bible*, notes on Matthew 25:32 & Revelation 20:12

³ Cornelis P. Venema, *The Promise of the Future* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2000) p. 394

suffering. It is a place of restlessness where the mercy of God is absent. There, the impenitent receive justice, not cruelty.

Though Hell is a place of sorrow for everyone who enters, the Scriptures also teach that there are varying degrees of suffering there. "How unpleasant Hell is, is directly determined by the kind of life one lived while on earth. Jesus said to the cities of Chorazin and Bethsaida that at the day of judgment, it would be far more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorra than for them, because if Sodom and Gomorra had heard what Jesus had to say, they would have repented... The Biblical principle is this: 'he to whom much is given, of him shall much be required' [Matt. 11:20-22]." ⁴ As Carl F. H. Henry notes: "All are judged by what they do with the light they have, and none is without light" [Romans chapters 1 and 2]. ⁵

The works of the unbeliever have a quantitative impact on the judgment they will receive. The greater their rebellion, the greater will be their punishment. The greater the light God has given them the more grievous is their rejection of it.

"But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. He will render to each one according to his works..." (Romans 2:5-6).

For those who have spurned the grace of God there is only the assurance of judgment. Once again, the small and the great (vs. 12) will answer before the bar of divine justice.

"Human rank, wealth, and social class will have no relevance whatsoever on that mighty day of wrath. Kings, presidents, prime ministers, emperors, dukes and earls, fearfully stand beside field hands, tractor drivers, janitors, preachers, school teachers, and prison inmates. Wealthy CEO's and media moguls will be fidgeting beside drug pushers and prostitutes... 'Small and great,' high and low, all are now on the same level, which is the way God always saw them." ⁶

What will be the experience of God's people on the day of judgment?

What John sees about the record of our deeds has often caused Christians to be filled with anxiety and fear concerning the return of Christ. Perhaps you have heard sermons in which you are told that all of your words, deeds and thoughts will be projected upon massive screens for all of humanity to see every shameful detail. We are left wondering how this can be if our sins have been forgiven. Or perhaps we wonder how we can be joyful at the prospect of Christ's return when that event will be connected to our most humiliating and degrading moment. How many days and weeks and months will be required to publicly expose every one of our sins? Let us respond to the those concerns in three ways...

First, it must be acknowledged that the good works (or lack thereof) of God's people do matter. Along with what John sees here in verses 12 and 13, consider the following:

- Mathew 16:27 – For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels and then he will reward each person according to what he has done.
- Romans 2:6 – God will give to each person according to what he has done.
- 2 Corinthians 5:10 – For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

Scripture never teaches for a single moment that God is disinterested in the good works of his people. Indeed, Christ saved us in part for good works (Ephesians 2:10). Christians are called to "keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation" (1 Peter 2:12). There is blessedness now and in eternity attached to our good works (2 Corinthians 5:10). So, our good deeds matter both now and in the age to come.

⁴ Douglas Kelly, *Revelation* (Scotland: Christian Focus, 2012) p. 394. See also, Cornelis Venema, *The Promise of the Future* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2000) pp. 403ff.

⁵ Quoted in Venema, p. 404

⁶ Douglas Kelly, p. 392

The importance of our works on the day of judgment will be especially weighty for ministers. The Apostle James warns that few should be teachers, “Because you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness” (3:1). In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul is referring specifically to ministers (especially to the apostles) when he writes: “If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire” (vv. 14-15).

In the end, however, the books – those recording the deeds of humanity and the book of life which records the names of the redeemed – tell us that we will face the Lord’s judgment either on the basis of our works or on the basis of God’s grace. Will we choose to stand in the judgment pleading our deeds on our behalf? Or will we choose faith in Christ, trusting to hear our name in the roll call of grace? As important as our good works are, they can never serve as the basis of or providing any contribution to our justification before God. Rather, the good works of Christians serve as evidence of the new birth. They testify that we have passed from death to life. The Christians’ good works are rendered unto the Lord for his glory.

That said, with the exposure of our all our deeds, will we not face a time of great shame at the judgment?...

Second, in the presence of the Lord we are told that we will be changed (1 Corinthians 15:51-52; 1 John 3:2). On that great day, our comfort will not be our concern. Freed from sin and bondage to decay and filled with the joy of seeing our Redeemer, our chief concern will be his glory and vindication.

What the judgment of our works will look like and how precisely we will experience that, we are not told. Given all we know about our status before the Lord and the fact that our sins have been removed from us, we can be confident that, prior to our welcome into the new creation prepared especially for us, God will NOT seek to take, as it were, a pound of flesh from us in the form of public humiliation. When Jesus returns it will be to welcome those for whom he laid down his life.

Third, the exposure of our sin will be an enormous source of comfort for us and an occasion for worship because it will magnify all the more the grace and mercy of God. Remember, the purpose of the day of judgment is not to determine the fate of humanity. That has already been done. The Lord already knows the state of every soul. God will not be deliberating on the day of judgment: “Whoever believes in [me] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God” (John 3:18).

The purpose of laying open the deeds of the redeemed is very purposeful. It is not for the purpose of condemnation. Rather, it will be done to magnify the mercy of God. Over every sin will be a bold line of cancellation: “And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross” (Colossians 2:13-14). The record of wrong that would have stood against us has been removed. The record of the sins of believers is a record of God’s mercy not a record of condemnation. “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). That is true today and it will be true forever.

The Heidelberg Catechism reinforces this comforting truth:

Q. 52 – How does Christ’s return “to judge the living and the dead” comfort you?

Answer – In all distress and persecution, with uplifted head, I confidently await the very judge who has already offered himself to the judgment of God in my place and removed the whole curse from me. Christ will cast all his enemies and mine into everlasting condemnation, but will take me and all his chosen ones to himself into the joy and glory of heaven.