

THE GREAT WHITE THRONE JUDGMENT

Revelation 20:11-15

Introduction:

Nearly 300 years ago, in 1741 a sermon was preached in New England that shook people to their very roots. Jonathan Edwards sermon entitled, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" was so startling and so dramatic that people were quaking in fear. It was not a dramatic delivery. It is said that Edwards held the manuscript so close that the people could not see the expression on his face, and he read the written manuscript word for word in a lifeless monotone. Yet the word pictures that Edwards painted of hell were so vivid, people were gripping the pews in fear, thinking that the very floor was going to open up and they would fall into hell on the spot.

Throughout the sermon people were falling on their knees and crying out to God to be saved. The revival which flowed from the sermon and others like it became known as the Great Awakening. The entire thrust of the sermon was on the reality of hell and what awaits those who reject God.

Well, times have changed. We don't hear much about hell today. It seems that no one wants to think about God's wrath. One church historian commented, "Hell disappeared, and no one noticed."

A few years ago, a pastor who claimed at the time to be an evangelical, wrote a book entitled, "Love Wins." In his book, Rob Bell basically debunked the idea that anyone would wind up in hell. In fact, the only hell he recognized as being real, is the unfortunate events or struggles we go through here on earth. In the end, God's love wins out and everyone gets to enjoy God forever. (I may be over-simplifying the message of his book but that is pretty close.)

However, the truth is that there is not much said these days about hell or judgment or punishment for sin. Yet the Bible has much to say on this subject—information that we dare not ignore. This morning we come to just such a passage in our study of the Book of Revelation.

Our text today describes what is commonly referred to as the Great White Throne Judgment. I want to examine this event in four segments:

- The description of the throne of judgment
- The people who will be judged
- The basis on which they will be judged
- The fate of those facing this judgment

The Description of the Throne – v. 11

This vision begins with a view of what John describes as a "great white throne" and the one who is seated on that throne. David Levy gives this explanation of why we call this the great white throne judgment:

- It is *great* because of the rank and dignity of the judge, the size and extent of the judgment, the vast number of people throughout world history who will be judged, and the fact that it will seal the eternal destiny of unbelievers.
- It is *white* because it displays and emphasizes the infinite purity and righteousness of Christ, who is the holy judge.
- It is a *throne* because Jesus Christ sits in sovereign majesty, using His authority to consign the wicked to eternal damnation.

The one seated on the throne is not named, but there is little doubt that it is Jesus, the Messiah, as he is the one who is to judge the world. In John 5:22, Jesus told the Jews, "The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son..."

v. 11b – "From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them."

It is not clear where exactly this judgment will take place, other than it will be somewhere in space, as heaven and earth will be destroyed at this point. Fruchtenbaum notes, "*A passing of the old order will occur at the time of the Great White Throne Judgment. The present heavens and earth, in existence since Genesis one, will be done away with. That which was renovated for the Millennium, but now polluted all over again with man's last revolt, will now be done away with forever.*"

The People who will be Judged – vv. 12-13

So who are the participants in this judgment? It will be the unbelievers of all the ages. *Read vv. 12-13a.* One of the significant things to note here is the reference to the people who are to stand before the Lord in this judgment. Four times in these two verses, John calls them “*the dead.*” Believers are referred to as the “*dead in Christ*” but unbelievers are simply called “*the dead.*”

All of the unsaved, those who refused to put their trust in Christ will stand before God. No matter what their status or position, power or prestige, all unsaved will stand before God to answer for their actions here on earth.

There are some terms in these verses that bear some scrutiny. John tells us that “...death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them...” Death is what claims the physical body of the deceased. Hades is the place where the soul of the unsaved is held awaiting the final resurrection for judgment. In the KJV that word is translated as hell.

There are actually three Greek words that are translated as hell in the KJV. There is the word *geenna (Gehenna)*, which refers to the Valley of Hinnom just outside Jerusalem. It was a place where the ancient pagans offered their children as sacrifices to the god Molech. In NT times it was a place where garbage and refuse was discarded and fire burned continually. Jesus often referred to it as a picture of the fires of eternal judgment.

A second word is *tartaros*, which is used only once - 2 Pet. 2:4. Ancient Greek mythology used tartaros to refer to the unseen world where evildoers were punished. Peter uses it in this verse to refer to the abyss – the bottomless pit, where the worst of the demons were held awaiting their final judgment.

Then there is the word *hades*. It is usually transliterated as Hades in the newer translations, although in Matt. 16 as Jesus speaks of the founding of the church he says, “...the gates of hell (hades) will not prevail against it.” It is generally used to refer to the place of the departed dead, but more specifically it refers to the place where the souls of the wicked are held as they await the judgment.

At the time of the Great White Throne Judgment, those departed souls will be released from Hades (Hell) and reunited with the bodies that are raised up from the grave. Then they will stand before Christ to face His judgment.

The Basis on Which they will be Judged – v. 12-13

Read vv. 12-13 again. A key phrase in these verses is, “...according to what they had done.”

Now wait a minute. Haven't we always said that a person's destiny is determined not by what he does, but by his relationship with Jesus. Isn't it a person's faith or lack of it that determines where they will spend eternity?

That is right. Something we must understand is that this judgment has nothing to do with destiny. That was already determined at the time of a person's death. *Refer to the books and the Book of Life.* There will be no believers at this judgment. They have already faced judgment for their deeds earlier at the Judgment Seat of Christ, which is not mentioned in Revelation, but is talked about in 1 Corinthians 3. For the believer there will be various levels of reward based on the deeds done in the body.

This judgment is about degrees of punishment. This is the judgment of the wicked. Their destiny is already sealed, but the question is the severity of their suffering. There is a principle in Scripture that teaches degrees of punishment based on degrees of sinfulness and upon greater or lesser light or knowledge and the response or lack of it to that light. A couple of Scriptures:

- Matthew 11:20-24 – Jesus spoke of things being more tolerable for some than for others in the day of judgment.
- Luke 12:47-48 – Jesus spoke of those who would receive many stripes and those who would receive few stripes.

Only those whose names are not in the Book of Life will be judged before the great white throne. But for those people, each one will be judged by the things written in the books—the deeds done throughout their life.

The Fate of those Facing this Judgment – v. 14-15

So what is the fate of those who stand before the judge seated on the great white throne? Look at v. 14-15 – *read them*.

Many times throughout the NT, the idea of eternal punishment is associated with fire and the torment that goes with that. Jesus story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16 tells of the rich man suffering in flames. Matthew 25:41 speaks of eternal fire that was prepared for the devil and his angels.

God never intended the lake of fire for people. It was prepared for Satan and the rest of the fallen angels. But when people reject God, and choose to follow Satan instead, the Bible is clear: that is where they too will end up.

Conclusion

This is not an easy message. But it is one that we all need to hear. Hell is a real place. The lake of fire is real and it is eternal. The Bible never speaks of annihilation for those who do not believe.

This truth should give us reason to pause. I want to leave you with two challenges:

1. Invitation to salvation – where will you spend eternity. Have you ever confessed and repented of your sin and turned to Jesus Christ in faith? For those who have not, their end is the lake of everlasting fire.
2. What about those around us who do not know Jesus Christ? Family members, friends, neighbours, loved ones? Do we really realize what will happen to them if they do not come to faith in Christ? What kind of responsibility and burden does that place on us?