A GREAT WHITE THRONE

Revelation 20:11-15

Key Verse: 20:12

“And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books.”

Thank God for this book of prophecy. It tells us very clearly what is coming in this world. Human history is heading towards the returning of Christ as King of kings and Lord of lords and his victory over all evil power. And the saints of all ages will reign with him on earth for a thousand years, as the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ.

Today’s passage concerns the great white throne for judgment after the millennial kingdom of Christ. The passage gives us the most serious and sobering scene in all of the Bible because it describes the most tragic event in the history of mankind, the great white throne judgment. This is man’s last day in God’s court. The language used in this passage is plain, simple, straightforward, unembellished. Yet, its description is truly astounding. There is a strong deception that life in this world is everything and death is the end of all. This deception misleads the whole world. Through this study, may we become aware of the great white throne judgment and clearly know how we are to live in this world.

**First, a great white throne (11).** Verse 11 says, “Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them.” This verse describes the scene. In chapter 4, when John was taken in the Spirit to heaven, the first thing he saw was a throne with someone sitting on it. It was the throne of ruling. Now John saw a great white throne for judgment. White symbolizes the purity of power – absolute power. There is a saying that absolute power means absolute corruption. But not so with the power of God. His power is pure and absolute, particularly the power of his righteous judgment from his great white throne. Perhaps David saw a glimpse of this throne and said in Psalm 9:7, “The LORD reigns forever; he has established his throne for judgment.” Daniel certainly saw this throne in his vision and wrote in Daniel 7:9-10, “As I looked, ‘thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze. A river of fire was flowing coming out from before him. Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court was seated, and the books were opened.”

Then who is the one who was seated on it? First of all, we can say that it is God, the Ancient of Days. Yet, Jesus said in John 5:26-27, “For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man.”

Here we see that the reason the Father gives the judgment to the Son is because he knows humanity as God, for he was one of them. And Apostle Paul said in Acts 17:31, “For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed . He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.” God is the judge, and God sits on the throne in the form of Jesus Christ and judges through Christ. Apostle Paul also said in Romans. 2:16, “This will take place on the day when God will judge men’s secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.” God judges through Christ. In Revelation 20, John saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it.” It is God in the form of the glorified Christ who sits in judgment. He is the One who has the best perspective, the best vantage point to judge man.

Interestingly, before the description of the judgment of the dead, it is written that earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. It was stressed that earth and sky were gone with no place found for them. It seems that earth and sky were judged, because they were also affected by sin. Genesis 1:1 says, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” And God’s creation was written in Genesis chapters 1 and 2. Now earth and sky were uncreated, and the uncreation is written just in one verse. Yet, this scene is comprehensive and massive.

All earthly sinners have now been destroyed, and all saints in the time of the Kingdom who were still alive at the very end would be immediately translated and transformed into the glorified form, and that’s the end of humanity. Humanity no longer exists. A physical universe, as we know it today, then, has no reason to exist. And it has been stained by sin, the sin of fallen angels. The whole universe has been polluted, and we’ve already seen God begin the destruction process in the time of the tribulation with all of the frightening events written in Revelation. It is the time for the whole cursed universe to be annihilated, from the galaxies to the end of creation.

Matter is particles in motion. Science says motion requires time because if something moves from one place to another, there has to be time. We cannot have matter unless we have time. Simply put, no time, no motion. No motion, no matter. No matter, no elements. No elements, no creation. Time began at the same time creation began. When time ends, creation goes out of existence.

Apostle Peter wrote concerning the destruction of the universe this way in 2 Peter 3:10, “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare (burned up).” The day of the Lord comes at the end of the tribulation at the returning of Christ Jesus, but the final expression of the day of the Lord waits a thousand years. However, we can understand this because right there in verse 8 Peter described, “with the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.” So the day of the Lord can certainly stretch across a thousand-year period. The point that is that the heavens and the earth will disappear with the elements being destroyed.

Isaiah 51:6 says, “Lift up your eyes to the heavens, look at the earth beneath, the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment…” The inhabitants of the earth should know that the earth is not a permanent one. It is not supposed to last. It has a very short lifespan. God created all things by his words of command. As God spoke, things came into being. Scientifically speaking energy produced material things. Now at the uncreation, things will turn into energy and that divine energy again will recreate a new heaven and a new earth unlike anything we’ve ever understood or even can comprehend.

The expression, “Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them” could be God’s judgment upon them. Then how much more man is to be judged!

**Second, the dead judged according to their deeds (12-14).** Now we can think of the sermon after the scene. Verse 12 says, “And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life.” Romans 5:12 says, “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned.” Since Adam’s fall, all men were to die. In history numerous people have come and gone. Some were famous in the world others were not. There were great and small in the world. They were all raised to life to be judged, if they had not had part in the first resurrection.

Truly blessed are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has power over them. How can we describe this blessedness through the Lord Christ Jesus, who bore all the sufferings and punishment in our place! Jesus said in John 5:24, “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.” Those who share in the first resurrection pass God’s judgment and have life that is eternal. They will enter the eternal kingdom of God. Truly this is indescribable grace of God! This grace should not be abused. So Paul said in Philippians 2:12, “Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.” And the risen Jesus said in Revelation 3:5, “He who overcomes will, like them be dressed in white, I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels.”

Verse 12b says, “The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books.” We know that God is omniscient, knowing everything. He does not need to record anything, since he knows all things, everything about everyone, in his mind. However, all things about each person are recorded in the books. We see that God is the God of record and the God of books. The judgment books were opened so that no one could make an excuse for his righteous judgment. We can say that God is careful and accurate in his judgment. And he knows that whose name would be written in the book of life. So, he also does not need to write the names in the book of life. Yet, he prepared the book of life. He is the God of carefulness and accuracy and the God of sureness and certainty. And since he is above all, no one could check whether he wrote correctly. Yet he did so to be true to himself. We can say again that his judgments are true and just.

The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. All things about all men were recorded in the books. It was like every act of man even word and thought being videoed and recorded. God knows all and remembers all things. No one can escape God’s eyes and his memory system. As we studied, it is written in 18:5, “…God has remembered her crimes.” However, one’s repented and forgiven sins in Jesus Christ are not remembered. Hebrews 8:12 says, “I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more”, which is a quotation from Jeremiah 31:34. He hurls all our iniquities into the depths of the sea (Micah 7:19). What a grace! Outside Jesus all sins of men are remembered and recorded. Jesus said in Matthew 12:36, “But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken.” Jesus also said in Luke 12:2, “There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known.” Apostle Paul said in Romans 2:16, “This will take place on the day when God will judge men’s secrets through Jesus Christ…”

And Romans 3:23 says, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” James 2:10 says, “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.” The standard of God, who is pure, holy and righteous, is perfection. And Isaiah 64: 6 says, “…all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.”

Who can escape God’s thorough judgment? In this world, people can escape the human court system with money or skillful tongues and writings. But not before the great white throne of God, who is all seeing and all-knowing and all powerful and absolutely pure and holy.

Then verse 13 says, “The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done.” When people die, the souls of the redeemed go to heaven where God dwells, but the souls of the condemned go to Hades, a sort of hell, a place of suffering and torment. As we studied in chapter 20:4, John saw the souls of those who kept their faith to the point of being martyred in heaven. In Luke 16:19-31, Jesus told a story of a rich man and Lazarus a very poor man. The rich man who enjoyed his luxurious life in this world was in torment with unbearable thirst in hell (which in Greek Hades) after death, while Lazarus was carried to Abraham’s side and was in great comfort in heaven. There has been a great chasm between the two places that traveling is not possible to the other side. Yes, after death one’s soul goes to heaven or Hades. In the Old Testament, *Sheol* is really the Hebrew word for the New Testament term, *Hades*. For example, Isaiah 14:9 says, “The grave (Sheol) below all astir to meet you at your coming; it rouses the spirits of the departed to greet you—all those who were leaders in the world; it makes them rise from their thrones—all those who were kings over the nations.” Sheol appears over sixty times in the Old Testament, and Hades ten times in the New Testament, mostly used by Jesus (Mt. 11:23; 16:18; Lk. 10:15; 16:23; Ac. 2:27, 31; Rev. 1:18; 6:8; 20:13, 14). But the bodies are buried in the grave or kept in the sea in the case of drowning or somewhere when cremated or decayed. Jesus said in John 5:28, “Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out…” And here in Revelation the sea gave up the dead that were in it. And death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them. Interestingly in Revelation, “Hades” is written 4 times and this term was used always with death. Jesus said in 1:18, “I hold the keys of death and Hades.” Yes, Jesus is the one who can put men in Hades and bring them out. And in 6:7-8 John wrote, “When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, ‘Come!’ I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! It is named Death, and Hades was following close behind him.” And here in 20:13, death and Hades gave up the dead and in 20:14, death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. When the grave and the sea cannot keep the dead bodies any longer but have to give them up and death and Hades cannot keep the souls of the dead anymore but have to give up the dead, the bodies and souls of the dead will come together and be resurrected to be judged and suffer eternally, while the souls in heaven have resurrected glorified bodies to live in eternal glory as they participate in the first resurrection.

And it says, “Each person was judged according to what he had done.” It clearly indicates that God’s judgment is very personal, however many are to be judged. We know that God is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, a very personal God for his called, chosen ones. In the same way, he is a personal Judge. Each person is absolutely alone before a great white throne judgment. The amount and severity of each person’s sin will be different. So is the degree of judgment of God, who is perfectly just. In light of this, outside Jesus the Saviour there is no point of living longer. For living longer means adding more sins and so bringing heavier judgment of God. Without Jesus, life is absolutely sorrowful and miserable and horrible. And according to Jesus, those who know the gospel but deliberately sins against God are more severely punished, and religious hypocrites are to be punished most severely (Mt. 11:22; Mk. 12:38).

**Third, anyone’s name not written in the book of life (15).** Verse 14 says, “Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death.” Until now, death swallowed up all people. Now death was thrown into the lake of fire, which is the second death. It is likely that death itself was swallowed up by the second death. Hades is also thrown there. Then up until now, the beast that is the Antichrist, the false prophet, Satan, death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire.

Then who else? Verse 15 says, “If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.” This is a horrifying statement. Each one was judged according to what he has done as recorded in the books. Then God looks at the book of life to confirm whether the name is written in the book of life. If not, the destiny would be really horrible to be thrown into the lake of fire and be tormented day and night for ever and ever as written in 20:10.

This book finds references in the Old Testament. Daniel 12:1 says, “At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose names is found written in the book—will be delivered.” All the noble, all those written in the book of life, they will awake to everlasting life. And Malachi 3:16 says, “Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honoured his name.” The LORD Almighty says continually, “They will be mine in the days when I make up my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him. And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.”

And Jesus said this to his disciples in Luke 10:20, “…do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.” Apostle Paul said in Philippians 4:3, “…the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.” Hebrews 12:23 says, “to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven.” In Revelation, the book of life is mentioned 5 times, in 3:5, “He who overcomes…I will never blot out his name from the book of life”, in 13:8, “All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast—all whose names have not been written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world”, in 17:8, “…The inhabitants of the earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the creation of the world…”, and here in 20:15, and in 21:27, “…only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.” This book is a special book. It’s the book that lists those who belong to the Lord, those who are the loyal, faithful servants of God. It is a list of the elect, the list of the faithful, the list of the redeemed of all the ages, all who had their sins forgiven because they have come to Christ. Especially in Revelation, the book of life belongs to the Lamb. It is the Lamb’s book of life. Those who have no part with the Lamb, their names cannot be written there. Those who do not repent of their sins and do reject the Lamb, who was slain for man’s sins, will have the terrible destiny. In chapter 14, we have seen those who follow the Lamb wherever he goes (14:4). The ultimate reason to be thrown in the lake of fire, which is the second death, is no relationship with the Lamb.

Here we need to think more about the lake of fire, which is eternal hell, different from Hades, where unsaved souls go and resides in torment waiting for eternal punishment. It’s amazing how specific the Scriptures are. In the New Testament the word “hell” which is the final punishment, is a translation of the Greek word “Gehenna”, the clearest and most vivid of the New Testament words which refer to the eternal final realm of punishment for the ungodly. It is a place that includes soul and body in hell. Now when we talk about the final punishment, most commonly fire is referred to. More than twenty times the New Testament refers to the fires of hell, and Jesus used the word hell most of those times. For example Jesus said in Matthew 10:28, “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” He also said in Mark 9:47-48, “And if your eyes causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell. Where ‘their worm dies not die, and the fire is not quenched.’”

The southwest of the city of Jerusalem there is a valley called the Valley of Ben-Hinnom. The Valley of Ben-Hinnom was for a long time the city dump of Jerusalem. The garbage, the refuse of the city was taken to the Valley of Ben-Hinnom, and it was then thrown into that valley. And there was a fire there that never went out, it was being burned all the time. And that valley was known for fire and smoke and maggots. Dead bodies were thrown there; the corpses of criminals were thrown there; the people who were not worthy to be buried, strangers and so forth, were thrown there. And what you had in the Valley of Ben-Hinnom was a filthy stench, an unending fire, maggots eating the garbage and the filth and the refuse and the corpses. It was the most frightening and fearful place. Probably when Jesus said, “their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched”, he was relating this place to Gehenna, showing the people even a bit of the vivid picture of Gehenna.

And it was the place where people offered children as sacrifices, burned alive to the pagan god Molech. The pagan nations in the land of Canaan had done it, and some of the children of Israel joined in that unbelievable worship. It was the Valley of Hinnom where the altar to Molech was. Jeremiah 32:35 says, “They built high places for Baal in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to sacrifice their sons and daughters to Molech, though I have commanded, nor did it enter my mind…” That’s one of the reasons that the Jews put the city dump there, because it was such a vile and foul and desecrated place.

Certainly the lake of fire is a far worse place. The lake of fire exists outside the created universe as we know it, outside time and space. It is a place of fearful, frightening, horrifying pain, agony, and torment, illustrated by the concept of being thrown alive into a lake of fire in which you can burn forever but never die. The further description of this place is the place of darkness (Mt. 8:12; [22:13](https://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/Matt%2022.13); [25:30](https://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/Matt%2025.30)), blackest darkness (2 Peter 2:17; Jude 13), gnashing of teeth in extreme sorrow and anger), the worm that never dies, an unquenchable fire of in torment, banishment and separation (Mt. 8:12; 22:13). Again, “If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”

Thank God for teaching us very clearly concerning the great white throne judgment. Being aware of this great white throne of judgment may we be forever grateful for the marvelous grace of Jesus and the great love of God that the Son Jesus received all the punishment in our place as he died on the cross as the Lamb of God. May we live our lives worthy of this grace by serving others with God’s love and truth so that through us, eternally perishing souls may come to the blessedness in Christ and their names be written in the book of life, one by one.