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### **Revelation 20:11–15, ESV**

*<sup>11</sup> Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. <sup>12</sup> And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. <sup>13</sup> And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. <sup>14</sup> Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. <sup>15</sup> And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.*

### **Revelation 20:4–6, ESV**

*<sup>4</sup> Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. <sup>5</sup> The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. <sup>6</sup> Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years.*

### **Galatians 6:9–10, ESV**

*<sup>9</sup> And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. <sup>10</sup> So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.*

## **The second death.**

Our belief as Christians is that we are saved through our faith, and that we do not have to earn eternity in the Kingdom of God by spending our lives doing a series of good deeds. We also believe, however, that the depth of our true faith will be strongly suggested by our acts. In other words, if we live evil lives, and don't practice what Jesus taught by forgiving, caring for others, living clean lives, and helping those in need, we're not condemned by this – but it's unlikely that we will be saved by our faith. But there are numerous Bible passages that make it clear that God does judge us. I'd like to look at this issue today. How do we resolve salvation by faith with the fact that each of us must face some sort of final judgement? First though, I'd like to talk about a kid I grew up with.

We'll call him Pete. He was one of those overly zealous types that was very afraid of committing sins for fear that one day, he would end up in Hell. They taught us Catholic kids that it was a grievous sin to miss church on Sunday, and when I was a kid, we tended to believe that committing a serious sin would land you in Hell if you died before you were forgiven. Now, obviously, it was more subtle than this, but we were kids and had a simplistic view of faith. Missing church is just one measure of your faith and God is not vindictive. But one Sunday when I was in six grade the church held a pancake breakfast to raise a

little money and to encourage fellowship. Pete was sent off by his parents that Sunday to attend the early Mass so that he could then go to some sort of athletic practice, I don't remember what. But when he got to church and smelled the food cooking next door, he fell to temptation, went straight to the pancake breakfast, skipping church. He then went to his practice. He told me about this the next day at school. He was terrified that if anything happened to him, if he were to be hit by a car before he could make things right with God, he would go directly to Hell. Now, as a Catholic, being forgiven was best done by involving a priest, and he was too scared to go to a priest. I thought it was pretty funny that Pete, who was a big, strong kid, was so scared. I have to admit that when he came to me and told me that he was worried about going to hell for skipping church, I gave him my best very-serious look and told him that indeed, it sounded like he would certainly end up in Hell. I told him I was sorry. I'll get back to this.

I want to make a point today that has to do with salvation by faith and the need for good acts. Specifically, I want to talk about something that we tend to ignore in the church today – because we're very concerned with making sure that services are uplifting and never scary. It's judgement. In particular, the final judgement. Consider our first quote. It's from the most difficult to read book of the entire Bible – Revelation. There are other books that contain apocalyptic

material, including Daniel, Joel, Zechariah, and Isaiah. Importantly, the New Testament Book of Revelation makes many references to the Old Testament Book of Daniel, and clearly, John, the author of Revelation was heavily influenced by the Book of Daniel. Daniel was a prophet who spent much of his life as an exile in Babylon. He recorded his experiences there and prophesized about the future. He wrote about the End Times. But Revelation is entirely abstract, symbolic, and without a lot of background knowledge, it can be impossible to interpret. We'll only discuss a small part of Revelation today. I'll make an attempt to educate all of us about Revelation incrementally in future sermons. But today, what I want to focus on is the fact that many people quote Revelation when they want to put the fear of ultimate judgement in the minds of believers.

Here is an abbreviated version of our first quote: <sup>11</sup> *Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done.* <sup>15</sup> *And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.* First of all, the great white throne is not a toilet, in case you were wondering. But seriously, what this quote says is that at the end of time, when the world ends and Christ

comes back, we will all be judged according to what is written about us in some books. These books describe what we have done during our lives. If your name doesn't appear in a certain book, the Book of Life, then you have done nothing good – and you are condemned forever. Note that being condemned this way, into the lake of fire is called *the second death*. The first death is when we die on earth. The second death is reserved only for those who are eternally condemned at the final judgement. A bit later in Revelation, we are told just who ends up suffering the second death, the total separation from God, being cast into Hell:

*<sup>8</sup> But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”* So, it sure seems like you can't count on being saved by faith alone. It seems from the Book of Revelation that your acts alone can condemn you.

Let's look at our second quote from Revelation. Here is an abbreviated form of it: *<sup>4</sup> Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand*

years. <sup>5</sup> *The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.* Now, this sounds better, actually. It says that those who have been beheaded for testifying that they are believers will live with God in Heaven. We need to keep in mind that Revelation was written by a man named John who had been sent to a tiny, rocky island called Patmos possibly only because he was a Christian. This was a period of time when the Roman Empire was beginning to hunt down, imprison, and kill Christians; and so, John, when he wrote the Book of Revelation saw believers as risking their earthly lives for the sake of their faith. To us today, being a believer does not mean you will be executed by the government, but it does mean that you will reign with Christ in the afterlife.

Suppose you fit both of these profiles, that you are a true believer who is willing to witness for Christ at any cost, and you are also someone who has committed some great sin, like worshipping a pagan god or murdering someone – or missing church? Keep in mind that the list of sins, *the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars*, is meant to suggest any truly horrible sin, and is not meant to be the exact list of sins that can condemn you on judgement day. The point is that many people are true believers, but they have also committed evil acts. This is where repentance and forgiveness come into play. It's very important to

understand this: The Bible tells us that if we believe, if we have faith, and if we truly repent of our sins, if we truly regret them, then God will forgive us. So, this first passage from revelation, about being tossed into the lake of fire, is for people who have done evil things but did not repent. That meant that they didn't have faith. They didn't actually trust God to tell them how to live.

But there is a subtle point that I want to focus on today. First, here's a little context on Revelation. It was written by a man who was called John of Patmos because he was exiled as a prisoner on the island of Patmos off the coast of modern Turkey. This is not the John who wrote a Gospel; the Book of Revelation is written in a much cruder, less literate Greek and the Gospel, and Revelation was written late in the first century, probably after the Gospel writer died. We don't know anything else about John of Patmos other than that he wrote Revelation. It is assumed that he was well known at the time, that he was a Christian leader who was cast onto this island because he was a threat to the Roman Empire. Perhaps if he had been a nobody, someone who would not have been missed by the Christian masses, he would have just been executed. He was eventually freed and allowed to return to the mainland. He wrote Revelation after he returned. He was concerned with two moral issues when he wrote Revelation: First, Christians were under great threat and had to be courageous

and willing to die for their faith. Second, there would be a final judgement and we all need to live according to Christ's teachings if we want to avoid the second death, i.e., being cast for eternity into the lake of fire. What's true is that in Revelation there are so many obvious references to current events in John's time that he was clearly as concerned – or more concerned – with writing about the evils of the Roman Empire than he was with warning us about the End Times.

We should think about the brief nature of life. It is a finite experience. We should do more than be believers. We should try to use our time here to give God lots of stuff to write about in the books that will be read on judgement day. We should do this not because we are afraid of being tossed into the lake of fire. Faith, repentance, and forgiveness will take care of that problem. Yes, it will matter if we have done wrong and never repented – because that will mean we never had true faith. Good acts do not replace faith. They cannot save us. But making mistakes does not condemn us, either - unless those acts are so grievous as to show we don't have faith, and if we don't repent.

We should be concerned about the books of life and what they say about us because the true reward for a good life awaits us on judgement day. That day isn't centered around punishment, like so many people have been taught for so many hundreds of years. It is focused on the reward of a God who will be

pleased with what we have done. The End Times will be a glorious time. It will be a time to review what we have done with our lives, beyond having faith. And it's never too late to start getting good stuff recorded in that book.

Our third quote says: <sup>9</sup>*And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.* <sup>10</sup>*So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.*

This says that we should live for the sake of being gracious, kind, and giving people. We should live for getting joy out of giving others joy. And we should pay particular attention to supporting other believers as they struggle with life.

Now, as for Pete. Let me just end with a prayer.

*God, let us not dwell on the negative side of the End Times. Let us live in joy, with deep faith, energized to fill the book that is written about us with simple, daily acts of kindness and forgiveness. Let us not worry about doing some great, magnificent thing. We are not here to single handedly end climate change. We are here to live like Jesus, in a humble fashion where we take advantage of any situation that allows us to demonstrate in small ways that we are indeed people of faith. And God, please forgive me for torturing Pete. At least I only waited an hour before I told him that I was sure that missing church was already totally forgiven by God because he, Pete, was actually a very good kid. Amen.*