

Sermon 10, The Future of Judgment, Revelation 20:11-15

Proposition: Someday, judgments in history will give way to the final judgment on history as God renders to each one according to his works.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we conclude our 10-part Primer on Judgment this morning. We have learned a lot about how God deals with His people. We've seen that judgments teach us to repent and to trust Him. When they fall on the wicked, they are not occasions for us to rejoice, but rather occasions for us to beware and take extra care, recognizing that what just happened to the wicked could and should have happened to us. Today, we turn from looking at how to handle judgments in this age, and begin instead to consider the question of when judgment will end. We saw in Lamentations two weeks ago that judgment indeed has an expiration date. We see today what that expiration date is. Judgment will come to an end at the last day. It will come to an end then because it will no longer be necessary after that point. Everything that judgment does in this age, in terms of teaching us to repent and driving us to depend on God as we feel the impact and pain, will not be necessary for God's children in the age to come. Why is that? Because God will render to everyone once and for all according to their works. From that point on, we will enter a new era, the "age to come" that Jesus spoke of so frequently. In that age, judgment will still be a reality for those not written in the book of life. But for us, the children of God, judgment will come to an end at the time when the events documented here are finished. Someday, judgments in history will give way to the final judgment on history as God renders to each one according to his works.

I. The Majesty of the Judge, v. 11

Our passage begins by noting the majesty of the judge. Again, I want to reiterate what I've told you many times: the closest contemporary genre to this ancient genre of prophecy or apocalypse is the film trailer. Like trailers, apocalypse and other prophetic genres work by simply throwing

up images on the screen, one after the other, a montage that gives some idea of what the whole movie is about. In the same way, John is not presenting the 2.5 hour feature-film version of the last judgment. This is just the trailer for it. But from this trailer, we can learn some profound truths about the judgment that's coming. The first of these, and the one the trailer opens with, is the majesty of the judge. We don't even see Him directly; we only see His throne, which is pure white. The whiteness of the throne represents the purity of the judge, His holiness in being set apart strictly for His own glory, and His vindication of His people in the face of those who falsely accused them. As for the judge Himself, we are not told what He is like. Chesterton explains why:

The popular imagery carries a great deal to excess the sentiment of 'Gentle Jesus, meek and mild.' It is the first thing that the outsider feels and criticises in a Pieta or a shrine of the Sacred Heart. As I say, while the art may be insufficient, I am not sure that the instinct is unsound. In any case there is something appalling, something that makes the blood run cold, in the idea of having a statue of Christ in wrath. There is something insupportable even to the imagination in the idea of turning the corner of a street or coming out into the spaces of a marketplace, to meet the petrifying petrification of that figure as it turned upon a generation of vipers, or that face as it looked at the face of a hypocrite. The Church can reasonably be justified therefore if she turns the most merciful face or aspect towards men; but it is certainly the most merciful aspect that she does turn.³

You won't find a statue of Christ in wrath. Not even John, with all the horrors he tells in this final entry in the canon of Scripture, can begin to describe the face of the judge seated on the throne as He looks at racists, child-murderers, concentration-camp guards, and selfish, ignorant, foolish, dastardly knaves like you and me. All we can say is that heaven and earth couldn't stand it. His countenance was fit to destroy them. There was no place they could go and hide from the wrath of the Lamb. Far from calling the mountains and hills to hide you, you will realize in that moment that mountains and hills, planets and suns, solar systems and galaxies, are insufficient cover. The universe itself cannot stand the face of its creator when He rises to judge the earth. If the mountains wither under His glance, do you imagine that you will boldly stand forward and declare "I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul"? Brothers and sisters, the idea is absurd. The majesty of the judge dwarfs the greatest majesty of imperial pomp that the human race has ever been able to stage or imagine. The set designers of Marvel Studios can't even come close. The majesty of nature is a better clue. Think of the elephant or tiger in their pride, or the majesty of sunset over the Pacific. Think of the nebulae and the galaxies. The one who lent them their majesty will show forth all of His at this moment when He arises to judge the earth. Covid, the Ten Plagues, the Exile — name your judgment. The majesty of the judge was still almost entirely concealed in every one of those. Only here, at the last judgment, will it blaze forth in all its glory. The effect will be world-shattering.

³ Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, Pt. 2, ch. II

II. The Accuracy of the Judgment, v. 12

So much for the first scene in the trailer for the final judgment that John presents to us in this passage. The camera shifts; we have a jump cut, and what we see now is an enormous congregation of the dead, standing in front of the great white throne presented in the previous shot. This piece of the trailer highlights the accuracy of the judgment. It is not random, partial, or incomplete. Rather, with it judgment can be finished because it is an exhaustive and final accounting for everything ever done by every last human being.

A. Its Subjects: All Mortals, v. 12a

That is the emphasis both here and in the next verse. The dead great and small are here. That means that no dead are left out, no dead excluded. Believers and unbelievers, those of high earthly station and those of no regard, and everyone in between, stand here before the throne. They have been summoned to court to face trial for what they did. And face it they will.

B. Its Standard: Each One's Deeds, v. 12c

The text informs us that the standard of judgment is not what you thought, not what you felt, not what you intended, but what you did. This is what Zion and the narrator were praying for in Lamentations. This is what we need in order to stop the cycle of violence. This is what God is going to look at.

What about believers, you ask? We too will be judged by what we have done. There is no condemnation for us. But our eternal destiny is in some sense related to how we lived here on earth. Are you growing in your capacity to glorify God and enjoy Him? The more you gave in to sin here, the more frequently you turned away from what you knew to be right, the less capable of enjoying God you'll be in Heaven.

Of course, the other standard is the law of God, which tells us what our deeds ought to look like. Your deeds will be evaluated based on whether they loved God and neighbor. That will be the standard by which all our works are evaluated.

III. The Universality of the Judgment, v. 13

The scene now shifts to resurrection.

A. It Covers Everyone, v. 13a

We see the dead rising out of the sea, resurrected to new life. We see the dead rising out the realm of the dead, Hades, resurrected to new life. John is emphasizing that this is the case for every last human being. If you lived on earth, you are going to stand before God and be judged.

B. It Judges All by the Same Standard, v. 13b

And again, the comprehensive nature of the judgment guarantees that you will be judged exclusively on whether you obeyed God. This is the standard by which Christ was judged; He passed with flying colors. This is the standard by which you and I will be judged too. In Him, we pass; outside Him, we go down in flames.

Brothers and sisters, temporal judgments mean that you need to labor to be found in Christ. Collapsing towers, falling bridges, spreading illnesses, bad governments and harsh invaders — all alike indicate that you need to repent, to run to Jesus, because He alone can

remove the sin which is the root cause of every one of these disasters and so many more. And in the same way, the final judgment sends us this message with tenfold clarity: Because judgment is coming where all wrongs will be set right, be sure that the wrongs you've committed have already been set right in Jesus! Without Him, you will perish. Unless you repent, you will perish.

IV. The Outcome of the Judgment, vv. 14-15

And in the final scene of this trailer, John gives us a glimpse of what perishing looks like.

A. The Temporary Gives Place to the Permanent, v. 14

First of all the temporary gives way to the permanent. Death and Hades, the "containers" or home of the dead in this era, are packed up and thrown into the lake of fire, the home of all those who die spiritually and remain dead. This is the second death. Death and Hades are for now; the Lake of Fire is for always. It has no expiration date. There God's wrath is always burning; there is always Hell to pay in that place. Earthly judgments will come to an end. Covid will end, just like the Ten Plagues did. This recession or depression or whatever it is will end too. But the temporary nature of judgment on this earth is a given. Death and Hades are just holding pens for the time being. The Lake of Fire is the permanent home of judgment, the permanent outcome for those who align themselves with evil and refuse to accept Jesus' death.

B. Those Lacking Jesus' Life Go into the Fire, v. 15

And so John tells us that everyone whose name is not written in the Lamb's book of life is thrown into the lake of fire. If you don't share Jesus' life, you will die. Permanently. That death is pictured as endless torment in fire. We're not sure exactly what that feels like, but we know that it will be really bad — far worse than we can imagine, but no worse than we deserve.

The books contain a perfect record of everything you've ever done. There's more than enough there to condemn the nicest and best of us. Salvation is not found by cleaning up your book or releasing an abridged version. Oh no. Salvation can be found only under the covering blood of the slain Lamb. His life is what keeps you out of the second death.

So brothers and sisters, in a time of judgment, we need Jesus. We need to wait for His deliverance from this temporary judgment, and we need to move Heaven and Earth to get in touch with Him. In His life we will live; without it, we will die under the weight of God's final judgment.

How do you want the judge to look at you? As His child, or as a criminal? The choice is clear. Now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation. Don't wait for that day when God will judge the secrets of men according to the gospel I proclaim. Instead, flee to Jesus for refuge now. You will find it in Him. Amen.