

“The Lake of Fire”
Revelation 20:11-15
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Today I want to talk about one of the most serious and terrible subjects in the entire Bible.

It was 6:21 a.m. on Tuesday April 21, 1992 and Robert Alton Harris was executed in the California San Quentin Prison gas chamber.

Forty nine witnesses watched including the father of one of the boys killed by Harris.

At 6:21 the cyanide was lowered into the sulfuric acid below the chair and Harris said his last words.

“You can be a king or a sweet-sweeper, but everybody dances with the grim reaper.”

When George Bernard Shaw completed a study of death he said he had come to one firm conclusion: one out of one dies!

Someone else wrote, “Death is the most democratic institution on earth... It allows no discrimination, tolerates no exceptions.”

(The above three illustrations taken from Blanchard p44

God says it this way in Ecclesiastes 8:8 “No one has power over the day of his death.”

But don't let my illustrations confuse you, the serious subject about which I speak this morning is not death.

It is: “What happens after death?”

More specifically it is about what happens to unbelievers after death.

Most specifically it is about the phrase used by John in our biblical text for today - The phrase is “the lake of fire” and the questions are What is it and who goes there?

I called this a serious and terrible subject **because if there is** a lake of fire or a “hell” as we popularly call it and human beings actually go there - the implications are almost unbearable.

C.S. Lewis wrote ““There is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity than this, if it lay...in my power. I would pay any price to be able to say truthfully, 'All will be saved.'” (Problem of Pain -106)

I wish there was a way I could justly avoid the subject because I have no desire to cause pain for those here who have loved ones who do not know the Lord or have even had loved ones die who apparently did not trust in Jesus.

I know for you this subject will be painful.

But I offer this consoling reminder:

If you know Jesus then you know He is good.

And you know that though now it is painful to think about the death and eternal destiny of those who do not trust God,

there is coming a day when you will stand before God and you will say
 “God you were good and right in everything you have done - I trusted you before but I see it now - even the eternal destruction of the ungodly is perfectly right!

Abraham summed this concept up with his rhetorical question:
 Genesis 18:25b “Will not the judge of all the earth do right?”

Until we see it and understand it more fully, we must simply trust Him.

With my limited understanding of things, I’m with C.S. Lewis in wishing there was no hell and that everyone eventually went to heaven

BUT I cannot rely on my wishful thinking I must rely on what God reveals in his Word and what Jesus, himself, taught.

If I’m going to have the privilege of believing what God teaches about heaven then I am forced to believe what he teaches about hell.

It all becomes unreliable intellectual mush if I pick and choose what I want to believe.

I want to again this morning set a context for the teaching God will give us about what happens to unbelievers after death.

NOW	TRIB.	S.C.	M	Judge ?
	8-17	18-19	20	20
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Next week we will focus on the eternal existence of believers.

This week we are focusing on the judgment and eternal existence of unbelievers.

Again the question: “What eventually happens to those who do not trust in and follow Jesus Christ?”

Let’s look at what God says in Revelation 20:11-15. READ IT.

“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. 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. 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. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”

The paragraph is fairly straight-forward but there are several words and phrases that must be looked at more carefully to better understand exactly what is being described here.

Before we decide that we know what John is describing here we probably better make certain we know the answers to some questions about this passage:

What is this throne and who is on it?

Who are the “dead” who standing before the throne?

What does it mean the dead were judged according to the books?

What are death and Hades who give up their dead?

What is the lake of fire and why is it called the second death?

What is the book of life?

Let's start with the setting.

What did John see first?

“I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence...”

Daniel predicted it and you will see in Daniel's words many words that are used by John in Revelation 20:

Daniel 7:9-10

"Thrones were set in place and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as the snow, the hair of his head was white like wool. This throne was flaming with fire... Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court was seated and the books were opened."

John, in Revelation, spoke of this throne earlier:

Rev 7:9 “A great multitude (144,000, symbolic of all believers) was "standing before the throne and in front of the lamb. They were wearing white robes and...they cried out in a loud voice: Salvation belong to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb."

He who sat on it is obviously God (the triune God)

The issue here is not to distinguish between Father, Son and Holy Spirit but to indicate that it is the awesome God who is on the throne.

What does John see next?

“And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne...”

Who are the “dead” that stand before the throne?

Earlier in this chapter we are told about a “first” resurrection.

Look at 20:4b and 5b speaking of the Christians who had been killed during the tribulation and by inference all believers of all ages John writes, “They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years...This is the first resurrection.”

Paul wrote of this First Resurrection in I Thessalonians 4:16

“For the Lord himself will come down from heaven...with the trumpet call of God and the dead in Christ will rise first and after that we who are still alive...will be caught up to meet the Lord...”

This is the first resurrection, the resurrection of all believers of all the ages, which will occur as Jesus comes again.

So if all **believers** are already resurrected as Jesus comes - Then at the great white throne, the dead must be unbelievers who are resurrected and stand before God.

Back in Revelation 20:5 we learn this must be the case.

“The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.”

Now when we come to our text for today, Revelation 20:11-15, the thousand years is ended and we see another resurrection.

Here’s the way verse 13 speaks of that second resurrection:

“The sea gave up the dead that were in it and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them...”

“Hades” is the Greek word for the place of the dead - the place where the **unbelievers** went when they died waiting for this final judgment.

John’s point in mentioning that the “sea gave up the dead that were in it” and that “death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them” is that John wants us to know that every **unbeliever**, no matter when they died or how they died, or how important they were in life, was resurrected to be present for this judgment day.

The picture thus far is of God seated on a throne and all unbelievers of all the ages have been resurrected and are standing before God.

The next thing John notes is that **some books** are opened and the dead are being judged (verse 12) “according to what they had done as recorded in the books”

He reiterates that point in the next verse.

“...and each person was judged according to what he had done.”

Daniel had spoken of books being opened at the judgment.

Other OT writers spoke of books in which people’s deeds were recorded.

John uses that same metaphor to describe God’s complete knowledge of everything we have thought, said or done.

Here’s the way the author of Hebrews wrote it:

“Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight, Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give an account.

Jesus in Matthew said it this way:

Matthew 12:36-37 “But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken...”

and in Luke 12:3 “what you have whispered will be proclaimed from the rooftops.”

In Romans 2:16 our thoughts will be uncovered.

In I Cor 4:5 even our motives will be revealed.

And James says both **what we do** that we shouldn’t have and what we **should have done** that we didn’t, will be revealed. James 2:10 and James 4:17

Unfortunately for over 2000 years people have mistakenly believed that if they are judged according to what is in the books - according to their deeds - they will somehow make it.

There is a book written between the OT and the NT called the **Testament of Abraham** in which it says that two angels record everyone’s deeds and then another angel weighs them to see if the good outweighs the bad.

That false concept has persisted for all these years in spite of what God says.

Romans 3:23 “All have sinned...”

and Romans 6:23 “The wages of sin is death...”

And Galatians 2:16 “by observing the law no one will be justified.”

No amount of good deeds can ever compensate for our sin against a holy God.

And to support that truth, notice what happens in

Revelation 20:14

“Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire.”

All of the resurrected **un**believing dead were judged according to what they had done and **with no exceptions** everyone was thrown into the lake of fire.

No one will ever be judged righteous or acceptable to God by his or her deeds in this life.

But the text clearly implies that many were not thrown into the lake of fire. Who were they?

Revelation 20:15

“If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”

By implication, who wasn’t thrown into the fire?

Those whose names were in the book of life.

There were two kinds of books opened at the judgment.

The books in which were recorded the thoughts, words and deeds of the unbelieving dead AND a “book of life” which had names in it.

Back in the OT book of Exodus Moses spoke of a book which contained the names of God’s people.

Daniel wrote of it this way:

Daniel 12:1

“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 name is found written in the book - will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake; some to everlasting life, others to everlasting contempt.”

David wrote of the book of life and Paul spoke of it.

Again we can see this is metaphorical language to describe those who truly belong to God.

In his Gospel John said it this way,

John 1:12

“...to all who received him (Jesus) to those who believe in his name, he gives the right to become children of God.”

We become part of his family, we are given his name, and we are placed in his family book - that is the book of life.

Staying out of the lake of fire is not by getting a good grade when the reports are read.

Paul said it this way - Ephesians 2:8 "for it is by grace you have been saved, through faith... not of works."

Everyone who stands before God at that judgment and tries to claim a relationship to God built on what they have done in this life will be condemned - about that this text is very clear.

If your name isn't in the book of life and God judges you by the other "books" - it's too late.

And to what are they condemned? To the lake of fire!
What is this lake of fire?

Verse 10 gives us a description,

"And the devil...was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night forever and ever."

In Mark, Jesus said it was a place "Where the fire never goes out."

In Matthew 3:12, he called it a place of "unquenchable fire".

In Luke 12:58 he likens it to prison.

In Revelation he called it a pit.

In Matthew 22:13 Jesus calls it a place of darkness and where there is weeping (grief) and gnashing of teeth (anger).

Often Jesus referred to this place as "gehenna".

Gehenna was an actual place just west of Jerusalem in the valley that was used as a dump for the city and fires burned there continually. You can imagine it as a place of refuse, fire and worms, maggots, etc.

By NT times this valley had become symbolic of the place of eternal torment for the wicked.

Using many very negative metaphors the Bible describes the lake of fire as torment, agony, wrath, anger, pressure, oppression, destruction, - it is a place of ultimate horror.

John Calvin wrote, "Now because no description can deal adequately with the gravity of God's vengeance against the wicked, their torments and tortures are figuratively expressed to us by physical things, that is by darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth and unquenchable fire. By such expressions the Holy Spirit certainly intends to confound all our senses with dread."

Terrible is the end of those who ignore God: The unbelieving dead are physically resurrected to stand before the judgment throne of God and then they are thrown into the lake of fire.

For how long?

I know there are some, and I am among them, who would like to believe that unbelievers are sent to the lake of fire and that after a while they simply cease to exist.

But what does God say?

In Revelation 20:10 we read that the lake of fire into which the devil and the beasts were thrown is a place where they will be tormented forever and ever.

In I Thessalonians 1:8-9 Paul wrote, "God will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord..."

Jude (7 &13) writes of the "eternal fire".

Jesus says it is an "eternal fire" Matthew 18:8

And most convincing are Jesus words in Matthew 25 when he contrasts the fate of unbelievers with believers:

"Then they (unbelievers) will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

It is difficult to argue for an everlasting heaven if you try to argue for a temporary hell.

Jesus says they are both eternal, everlasting, forever.

I know that is a terrible judgment and I want to come back to that issue in a minute.

But before I do I hope to clear up some confusion about the words we use in describing what happens to people after death.

The Bible describes three periods of time for people:

Their life on earth, their death, and their resurrection to eternity.

Death is sometimes known as the "intermediate state" between life as we know it here on earth and the life to come.

In the intermediate state, after death, and before the resurrection, what happens to people?

Where do they go?

For unbelievers, the OT called it Sheol, the NT calls it Hades - it is the place where unbelievers go when they die, awaiting the second resurrection and the judgment.

We sometimes call it "hell" (though that is not technically correct).

But it is important to distinguish that place from where unbelievers go after the judgment BECAUSE in this intermediate place the unbeliever has no body, he is only a spirit, a soul.

But according to Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16 even though the unbeliever in this temporary place has no body he is still suffering.

The OT likewise refers to this waiting place as a place of awareness and punishment.

This is not "limbo" and it is not "purgatory" two places that are 16th Century inventions that have no biblical basis whatsoever. The destiny of unbelievers, according to Jesus, is sealed at their deaths.

Then, as we have seen, after the Millennium, the unbelieving will be resurrected at the judgment throne and they will be physically thrown into the "lake of fire".

Exactly what that experience will be like, we obviously don't know because words can't describe it - but it will be terrible and it will be forever. Jesus refers to the lake of fire as "hell".

What about believers?

According to Jesus and Paul, when believers die they go immediately into the presence of the Lord.

Since Jesus is with the Father in a place we call heaven - it is appropriate to say that a believer goes to heaven when he or she dies.

But again remember, the believer, before the second coming of Jesus, does not have a body - that will come in the resurrection.

And when we are resurrected and after the Millennium, as we will see next week, God will create a new earth on which we will live for eternity - that place we also refer to as heaven.

What is it like before the resurrection? For Believers and unbelievers?

Listen again to John Calvin's wise advice:

"Now it is neither lawful nor expedient to inquire too curiously concerning our

soul's intermediate state. Many torment themselves overmuch with disputing as to what place the souls occupy and whether or not they already enjoy heavenly glory. Yet is foolish and rash to inquire concerning unknown matters more deeply than God permits us to know. Scripture goes no farther than to say that Christ is present with them, and receives them into paradise that they may obtain consolation, while the souls of (unbelievers) suffer such torments as they deserve. What teacher or master will reveal to us that which God has concealed?" Institutes Book III chap xxv sec 6:

While we don't know much about the intermediate state, we are told much about our eternal circumstances.

Unbelievers will spend eternity in the lake of fire.

But that fate is so terrible that some of us reel at the thought of it and wonder, "How that can possibly be fair of God?"

Some ask it this way, "How can a God of love send innocent people to hell forever - to such a terrible eternity?"

There are two major errors in the question.

First of all while God is a God of love he is also a God of holiness.

In fact God's holiness is spoken of far more often in the Bible.

We like to focus on God's love but when we do so to the exclusion of his holiness and justice we create in our minds a caricature of God, not the real God.

If we had an understanding of how holy God is we would not wonder at the punishment of unbelievers.

Jonathan Edwards said it this way, "The punishment is no greater than the glory and greatness of God against whom we have sinned.

God's very nature is more averse to sin than (our physical bodies) are to eternal punishment."

The second error in the question, "How can a God of love send innocent people to hell forever - to such a terrible eternity?" is the phrase "innocent people".

There are no innocent people.

Romans 1 and 2 deal with that issue extensively.

Everyone who is thrown into the lake of fire willfully chose to reject God.

Everyone who is in the lake of fire would have to admit, if honest, they chose it.

They did not want God, they did not want the life he offered.

They wanted their own life and their own way.

Will anyone still charge God with unfairness if people are getting what they deliberately chose and not getting what they willfully rejected?

C.S. Lewis wrote, "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God 'Thy will be done' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done'. All that are in hell chose it." (Great Divorce p 16-17)

"I willingly believe the damned are, in one sense successful, rebels to the end; the doors of hell are locked on the inside." (Problem of Pain 127)

When Jesus said that in the lake of fire there would be weeping and gnashing of teeth - the gnashing of teeth is, as I pointed out earlier, an incredible anger - anger at God.

People in hell will not wish themselves with God - they will spend eternity cursing God.

Is the terrible "lake of fire" fair? Tragically it is!

What response do we have to this teaching of God in Revelation 20?

Two responses:

1. I must do anything to avoid this place.
2. I must do all I can to help others avoid it.

Escaping the lake of fire is as simple as acknowledging, asking and believing. It is to acknowledge that I am a sinner deserving eternal punishment and that I'm ready to repent - to turn from my sin.

It is to ask God to forgive me for my sins and give me life based on the fact that Jesus died for my sins - he took the punishment for me and rose again from the dead.

And it is to believe that he will forgive me and give me his eternal life and name if I ask him to.