

The Doorway to Heaven

Based on Revelation 20:11-15 | Sermon 3 of 5: The Last Judgment

"The thought of this judgment is a very pleasant and great comfort to the righteous elect." — Belgic Confession, Article 37

SERMON SUMMARY

This sermon — the third in a five-part series on heaven — approached a subject that makes most people uncomfortable: the last judgment. The great cathedrals of medieval Europe placed a carved image of the judgment scene directly above their entry doors — a practice called the tympanum. On one side of the enthroned judge stood the saints being led to blessedness; on the other, the condemned being led to damnation. Every worshiper passed under judgment to enter the building.

We have moved away from that. Modern church culture favors welcoming, attractional entranceways. And yet the medieval Christians were onto something the Belgic Confession preserved: "The thought of this judgment is a very pleasant and great comfort to the righteous elect." The Heidelberg Catechism asks: "How does Christ's return to judge the living and the dead comfort you?" Today we wrestle with how judgment can be a comfort — and the answer is found in who is sitting on the throne.

The Scene: The Climax of History

Revelation 20:11-15 is the sixth of seven visions in Revelation. It comes at the climax of a cascading series of judgments, immediately after the last battle. At this moment, all of human history arrives at its final point. Everything disappears — earth, sky, all of creation — except for one thing: a courtroom, and a judge.

Revelation 20:11-12 "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. Then I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and the books were opened."

The throne is great — the Greek word *megas* means not only large but weighty, mighty, of immense consequence. It is white, meaning pure and holy, undefiled by corruption or injustice. At the center of the end of all things is not chaos, not darkness, not silence. It is a throne, and on it sits a judge.

The Plaintiffs: Everyone Who Has Ever Lived

Before this throne stands every human being who has ever been born. The sea gives up its dead. Death and Hades give up theirs. No one is hidden, no one is exempt. Hebrews says, "No creature is hidden from his sight; all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account."

The Belgic Confession describes the scene vividly: men, women, and children who have lived from the beginning of the world to its end — gathered around the throne in glory. Adam and Eve alongside Cain and Abel. Tyrants standing in the same line as the very people they oppressed. From the first child born to the last child conceived at the close of history, all of humanity finally stands in one place before one judge.

The Books: Our Lives on Record

The text states three times — with deliberate repetition — that the dead are judged according to what they have done as recorded in the books. This is not figurative. Scripture is consistent and unsettling on this point:

Matthew 12:36 "I tell you that men will have to give an account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken."

Matthew 16:27 "The Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done."

Luke 12:2 "There is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, and nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out into the open."

Romans 14:12 "Each of us will give an account of ourselves to God."

The books contain not only sins of commission — the things we did wrong — but sins of omission. C.S. Lewis, reflecting on Matthew 25 (the sheep and the goats), observed that the goats are not condemned primarily for what they did, but for what they failed to do. The heavier charge may fall not on our worst acts, but on the good we never did and perhaps never intended to do.

The Degrees: Judgment Shapes Not Just Where We Go, But What We Find

The sermon made a point that is rarely discussed: the judgment determines not only destination but degree. Scripture teaches gradations both of punishment and of reward.

- Degrees of punishment: Jesus says it will be "more bearable" for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for Chorazin and Bethsaida, who saw his miracles and did not repent. Those given more will be asked more. The servant who knew the master's will and didn't follow it is beaten with more blows than the one who didn't know.
- Degrees of reward: In the parable of the minas, one servant's faithfulness earns authority over ten cities; another's earns five. In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul describes builders using gold, silver, costly stones — or wood, hay, and straw. The day will test the quality of each person's work. Some will receive a reward; some will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.

As Herman Bavinck wrote: "Scripture teaches very clearly that there are degrees of punishment... All will receive according to their works. There is an infinite diversity also on the other side of the grave." Jesus himself said, "Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven." What we do now is being deposited into an account we will one day receive.

The Other Book: The Book of Life

But then the text pivots to something else. Alongside the books of deeds, there is another book — the book of life. This book runs throughout all of Scripture:

- Moses, interceding for Israel after the golden calf: "If not, blot my name from the book you have written." (Exodus 32)
- Daniel: "At that time your people — everyone whose name is found written in the book — will be delivered." (Daniel 12:1)
- Jesus: "Rejoice that your names are written in heaven." (Luke 10:20)
- Revelation 3: "I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father."

When was this book written? Revelation 13:8 answers: the names in it were written "from the creation of the world." This book was written before the beginning of time. And who wrote it? The lamb who was slain. The

book of life belongs to the lamb — which means the judge seated on the great white throne is not a distant, impartial magistrate. He is the very one who died to write our names in it.

The Judge Is Our Advocate

This is the stunning reversal at the heart of the sermon. Who sits on the throne at the climax of history? The Apostles' Creed answers: Jesus Christ, who will come to judge the living and the dead. John 5 confirms: the Father judges no one but has entrusted all judgment to the Son. The judgment seat of Christ is also the mercy seat of Christ.

The man on the throne is the man who hung on the cross. Our judge is our advocate. When the books of our deeds are opened and every sin is read aloud, the one pronouncing sentence is the one who already bore that sentence. Each charge is met with the same answer: he paid that one too. He paid that one too. He paid that one too.

Our names were written in the book of life before the foundation of the world — not by our deeds, but by grace. And our deeds, however imperfect, are the fruit of that grace flowing through us. The judgment does not contradict the gospel. It displays it — publicly, finally, and completely.

| **Revelation 20:15** "If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."

Two Conclusions

1. Our present lives matter — ultimately. The books are being written now. What we do, what we say, what we leave undone — none of it is lost. Every act of faithfulness, every careless word, every missed opportunity for good is being recorded. This is not meant to terrify, but to awaken. What we do today matters forever.
2. The doorway to heaven passes through judgment — and that is a comfort. Because the judge is the lamb who was slain. He who bore every sin in the books is the one who will read them aloud. And for those whose names are written in his book, the verdict has already been spoken from the cross. The doorway is not a gauntlet. It is a homecoming.

Key Takeaway

The last judgment is not a threat designed to frighten the faithful. It is a display of God's sovereignty, justice, and grace — all at once. Our judge is our advocate. The one on the throne is the lamb who was slain. Every sin in the books was paid for by the one who wrote our names in the other book. The doorway to heaven passes through judgment — and for those in Christ, it is the most welcome doorway imaginable.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Take your time. Listen well to each other. There are no wrong answers — only honest ones.

1

The medieval cathedrals placed the judgment scene above their doorways — not to frighten but to frame. The Belgic Confession calls the thought of judgment "a very pleasant and great comfort to the righteous elect." Does that claim surprise you? Does judgment feel like comfort to you, or something else?

2

The sermon described the books of deeds — every word spoken, every act done, every good left undone — being read aloud before everyone who has ever lived. When you sit with that image honestly, what is your gut reaction? What does it stir in you?

3

C.S. Lewis noted that the goats in Matthew 25 are condemned not primarily for what they did wrong, but for what they failed to do right. How does the weight of sins of omission — the good we didn't do — sit with you? Is that a harder charge to carry than the things you've actively done wrong?

4

The sermon taught that judgment shapes not only where we go but what we find — that there are degrees of both punishment and reward. How does the idea that heavenly reward varies according to faithfulness change the way you think about ordinary daily choices — the offering plate, the difficult colleague, what you do with a free afternoon?

5

The book of life was written by the lamb who was slain, before the foundation of the world. Our names in it have nothing to do with our deeds and everything to do with God's grace. How do you hold that truth together with the truth that we will be judged according to our works? Do they feel like a contradiction, or do they fit together?

6

The sermon's climax was this: the man on the throne is the man who hung on the cross. Our judge is our advocate. For those in Christ, every charge in the books is met with "he paid that one too." How does knowing the identity of the judge change the way you approach the thought of standing before him?

7

The dying grandfather in the closing story said his greatest anticipation was to hear the words: "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord." What would it mean for you to live this week in such a way that those words would be a fitting response to it?

LIVING IT OUT

The books are being written now. What we do today matters — not to earn our way in, but because our names are already written there by grace, and grace produces fruit.

In Your Inner Life

- Read Revelation 20:11-15 slowly this week, and then follow it immediately with Revelation 21:1-5 (the new heaven and new earth). Let the two passages sit together: judgment leads to renewal, the throne of judgment is the throne from which all things are made new.
- Sit with this question: If the books of your life were opened today — every word, every deed, every good left undone — what would the record look like? Not to produce shame, but honesty. Bring what you find to God in confession. The advocate is also the judge.
- Memorize Revelation 3:5 this week: "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." Let it be your anchor against fear and your spur toward faithfulness.

In Your Closest Relationships

- The sermon asked: does it matter how you respond to a frustrating colleague this week? Does it matter what you say at home? Let the reality of the books — that nothing is lost, nothing is forgotten — give weight to the words you speak to the people closest to you this week. Choose one conversation to approach with unusual care.
- The dying grandfather's greatest hope was to hear "well done, good and faithful servant." Talk with someone you are close to this week about what faithfulness looks like in the specific season of life you are both in right now. What does a faithful week look like for you?
- Is there a relationship in your life where sins of omission have piled up — good you should have done and haven't? A word of encouragement withheld, a reconciliation delayed, a need you've been aware of and walked past? This week, do the thing you've been leaving undone.

In Your Daily Life and Work

- Jesus said to store up treasures in heaven. The sermon described this as making deposits in an account you will one day receive. This week, identify one specific act of faithful stewardship — of time, money, words, or service — that you can make as a deliberate deposit. Do it with that frame in mind.
- The sermon noted gradations of reward: some builders will receive a reward; others will be saved only as escaping through the flames. Ask yourself honestly: am I building with gold and silver, or with wood and hay? What one area of your daily life most needs to be rebuilt with better materials?
- The books include every careless word spoken. Pay attention this week to the words you use thoughtlessly — in frustration, in humor, in haste. Not as a performance, but as a practice of awareness. Words matter. They are being recorded.

In Your Faith Community

- This is the third sermon in a five-part series. Write down your one biggest remaining question about the last judgment — something the sermon raised but didn't fully resolve for you. Bring it to the next sermon or to a conversation with a pastor or elder.
- The medieval tympanum placed judgment above every church doorway as a reminder of what Christian worship is oriented toward. As you gather for worship this week, pause at the door for one moment and remember: we enter to worship the one who will judge the living and the dead. Let that awareness shape your posture inside.

- If there is someone in your congregation who is elderly, facing death, or wrestling with fear about what comes after, this sermon's core comfort — our judge is our advocate — may be exactly what they need to hear. Consider carrying it to them personally this week.

A Word to Carry

The books are real. The judgment is real. And the judge is the lamb who was slain — the one who bore every charge in every book, and who wrote your name in the other one before the world began. Stand at the doorway without fear. He paid that one too. He paid that one too. He paid that one too.

SERVICE CHALLENGE

The books record not only what we did, but what we left undone. This week's challenge is to do the good that is in front of you — the thing you've been passing by.

This Week's Challenge: Do the Good You've Been Leaving Undone

The goats in Matthew 25 are not condemned for spectacular wickedness. They are condemned for ordinary, everyday, unremarkable failure to act. This week, close that gap.

Step 1 — Name the Thing.

Identify one specific good you have been aware of and have not done. A person you should have reached out to. A need you have seen and walked past. A word of encouragement you've meant to give. An act of generosity you've delayed. Name it specifically.

Step 2 — Do It This Week.

Not next week. Not when the moment is more convenient. This week. The books are being written. The good you do today is a deposit you will one day receive. The good you leave undone is a page you cannot unwrite.

Step 3 — Do It Without Fanfare.

Don't announce it. Don't frame it as a spiritual exercise. Just do the thing. The one who sees in secret will reward openly. Let the act be between you, the person you serve, and the judge who is watching.

Step 4 — Offer to Pray.

If it is appropriate, end your act of service by asking if you can pray for the person. Keep it brief and honest. Let them hear someone who knows the judge speaking to him on their behalf.

Step 5 — Come Back and Share.

If you're in a small group or Sunday school class, come ready to share what you did. Not for credit — the books are already written. But because the body grows when its members practice obedience together and name it out loud.

Optional Extended Challenge

- Read Matthew 25:31-46 (the sheep and the goats) this week alongside Revelation 20:11-15. Let the two passages interpret each other. What does Matthew 25 tell you about what kinds of deeds fill the books? What does Revelation 20 tell you about the stakes?

- Look up Belgic Confession Article 37, which describes the last judgment in full. Read it slowly. Notice which parts comfort you and which parts unsettle you. Bring both to prayer and, if possible, to a conversation with someone in your congregation.
- Store up one treasure in heaven this week that costs you something — time, money, comfort, or pride. Do something genuinely sacrificial for someone who cannot repay you. Let the reality of the judgment — and the grace of the judge — motivate it.

Closing Prayer Guide

Whether you're using this in a group or on your own, close by praying through these four things:

- Give thanks — that our judge is our advocate, that the lamb who was slain sits on the throne, and that for those in Christ, every charge in the books has already been answered.
- Confess honestly — both the sins of commission and the sins of omission. The good left undone. Bring the record before the one who bore it, and receive his forgiveness.
- Ask for awakening — that the reality of the books being written would give holy weight to ordinary choices this week: every word, every act, every opportunity to do good.
- Pray to hear the words — ask God that the shape of your life, by his grace working through you, would one day merit the verdict: "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord."

"The man on the throne is the very man who hung on the cross. Our judge is our advocate."

— From This Week's Sermon