

Systematic Theology
Then I Saw A Great White Throne
Selected Scriptures
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For those of you who may be visiting with us, I should tell you that you find us tonight in the middle of a four-year study of the great doctrines of the Bible. We started, when I first came as pastor of this church, with the doctrine of Scripture. What does the Scripture teach about itself? And tonight, we find ourselves toward the end of the doctrine of last things. What does the Bible say about what's coming? And tonight, we move to that awesome event that theologians call the great white throne judgment.

Philip of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great, gave one of his slaves a very interesting assignment. He told him every day of his life no matter the circumstances, no matter where they found themselves, every morning this slave was to enter Philip's presence and say in a loud voice, "Philip, remember that you must die." This was of course Alexander the Great's father's way of remembering his mortality and making the most out of every day.

You've heard it all your life as I have. There are only two things certain in life: death and taxes. Taxes are not always certain, but there's one reality that is certain. That's always death. The writer of Hebrews puts it like this in Hebrews 9:27, "it is appointed for men to die once." The mortality rate is the same over the entire earth—one death for every one person. But the writer of Hebrews adds, "and after this comes judgment." God has sealed into the consciousness of man this reality. In fact, it's interesting that back in the last decade, a *Times Mirror* survey discovered that four out of every five Americans, four out of every five, eighty percent, believe that we all will be called before God at the judgment day to answer for our sins. Of course, there are some who deny a future judgment. I think it was Shelling who said that "the history of the world is the judgment of the world." In other words, what we endure here in human history is all of God's judgment that we will ever see.

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But that's not what Hebrews 9 says. It's not what Hebrews 6:1-2 says either. In Hebrews 6:1-2, the writer of Hebrews lists eternal judgment as one of the basic fundamental teachings of Scripture. And it is taught throughout the Scripture. If you were to go back into the Old Testament, just a sampling of a couple of verses, in Psalm 96, verse 13, we read, the Lord is coming, "for He is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in His faithfulness." The writer of Ecclesiastes, Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, says, "For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil." And throughout the Old Testament, you find similar references that reveal the reality of coming judgment. God has written this into the heart and soul of every human being.

When you come to the New Testament, it's no different. There you discover passages like Matthew chapter 12, verse 36 where Jesus said, "I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment." In Acts 17, Paul said to those there on Mars Hill, "Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness."

You see it in Romans chapter 2. In fact, turn there with me for a moment, Romans chapter 2—a great passage about God's judgment and the principles of His judgment. Verse 4 says, "Do you think lightly" or let's go back to verse 3 where Paul says "do you suppose," you religious man, you in this case, probably Jewish religious man, do you suppose that "when you pass judgment on those who practice such things and do the same yourself" in other words, you're a hypocrite, you have hypocrisy, do you suppose "that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?"

In other words, don't misunderstand. The fact that judgment hasn't fallen on you does not mean that it won't. In fact, by "your stubbornness and unrepentant heart" Paul says, "you are storing up wrath." It's as if you had a component or a place in your home where you are storing up

God's wrath by your stubborn refusal to repent. Verse 6 says, "He will render to each person according to his deeds." It's coming—the judgment.

In 2 Timothy chapter 4, verse 1, Paul says, "I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead." And we already saw Hebrews 9:27, "It is appointed unto men to die once, and after this the judgment."

If that wasn't enough, what about Jesus Christ? What about His ministry? Jesus Christ Himself, the messenger of God's love, was also a preacher of divine judgment. The word "hell" is used twelve times in the New Testament. Eleven of those times are from the lips of Christ Himself, the only exception being in James chapter 3, verse 6. Twelve of Jesus' thirty-six parables speak about coming judgment. Jesus, who said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" is the one who also preached about the reality of coming judgment.

And God has given us warning, hasn't He? God has given warnings even in the past. God's judgment has already fallen in human history. Peter uses God's past judgments 2 Peter chapter 2, verses 4 through 9 as evidence of future judgment. He says, "If God did not spare the angels when they sinned" this is his first reminder of God's judgment in history, "if God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment"; and his second piece of evidence, if God didn't "spare the ancient world" that is, in the time of Noah but "brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly"; his third line of evidence, and if God "condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing them to ashes" then the Lord knows how "to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment." Peter says look back. Don't put your head in the sand. God has interacted in human history to bring judgment so don't imagine that He won't again.

But it is true when you look at the world in which we live that God has not always judged and immediately judged sin in this world. We find ourselves along with the people of Malachi's time saying things like "where is the God of justice?" and "You have said, 'It is vain to serve God; what profit is it that we have kept His charge, and that we have walked in mourning before the Lord of hosts? So now we call the arrogant blessed; not only are the doers of wickedness built up

but they also test God and escape.”” Look at what’s going on in the world. Where is God’s justice? But the testimony of God’s justice, the testimony of Scripture—and we covered this when we covered God’s justice on Sunday night now a couple of years ago—not one sin will ever undermine God’s justice. Not one sin will ever escape God’s notice. And not one sin, not a single sin, will ever go unpunished. Every sin will be punished. It will either be on Christ in our place or it will be on the sinner forever.

Now last week, we looked at the judgment seat of Christ, the judgment of believers, where our service as Christians will be evaluated. Tonight, I want us to examine the frightening future judgment of unbelievers. Now, you know, it’s a valid question to ask. Why is such a judgment even necessary? I mean, it’s obviously not so God can determine their destiny. After all, God made the decision of election in eternity past even as we’re learning on Sunday morning. And His decision becomes obvious at death because at the moment of death, believers pass immediately into the presence of Christ and unbelievers wake up immediately in hell. God already knows the degree of punishment each unrepentant sinner deserves. So, what is the purpose of such a public show of judgment? I think Louis Berkhof had it right when he said this:

The assumption that the final judgment is for the purpose of ascertaining what should be the future state of man is entirely wrong [in other words, God doesn’t need to have a judgment to decide what to do]. Instead [he says], it will serve the purpose rather of displaying before all rational creatures the declarative glory of God in a formal forensic [that is, legal] act which magnifies on the one hand His holiness and righteousness and on the other hand, His grace and mercy.

It puts the character of God on display before all rational beings. And it is a reality.

The central text for our study of the final judgment and where I want you to turn tonight is Revelation chapter 20, verses 11 through 15—a judgment called the great white throne judgment. And tonight, what I want us to do is work our way through this brief passage and see several elements of this judgment. Let me read it for you. Revelation chapter 20, verses 11 through 15:

Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

I want us to begin tonight by looking at the day of judgment or the timing of judgment. The timing of this coming judgment is made relatively clear by the chronology of the context. Notice how verse 11 begins: "Then I saw." In Revelation, that little phrase, and particularly in the last three chapters of Revelation, that little phrase creates a timeline of the events that will occur at the end. In chapter 19, verses 11 through 18, there was the second coming. That was followed immediately in verses 19 to 21 by Armageddon. Chapter 20, verses 1 to 3, you have the binding of Satan immediately followed in verses 4 through 6 by the thousand-year millennium, the earthly reign of Jesus Christ. In chapter 20, verses 7 through 10, you have Satan's final rebellion followed by the passage I just read to you—the great white throne judgment in Revelation chapter 20, verses 11 through 15. And then that is followed in chapters 21 and 22 by the new heaven and the new earth. So, in other words, the chronology of Revelation 19 to 22 places this judgment after the millennium, after the thousand-year reign of Christ on the earth, but before the new heaven and the new earth. That's the day or the timing of the judgment. What about the place of judgment? John simply says: "Then I saw a great white throne." In John's vision, the place of judgment is described in those three simple, but terrible terms. Look at each one of them—first of all "great." That is a description of its size. It's huge, overwhelming in size. It dominates everything in his vision. It is great. It is a solemn, majestic throne. It reminds me of the prophecy of Isaiah. You remember in Isaiah chapter 6, verse 1 where in the year that King Uzziah died, Isaiah says "I saw the Lord high and lifted up and His train filled the temple."

Absolutely dominated everything in sight and that's how this is described. It has a grandeur to it, this throne, that cannot be pictured. I wanted to have a picture somewhere in my presentation just of a throne that was majestic and exalted, but we can't conjure up anything that will equal the picture that Scripture wants to draw here. You have to imagine it. You have to picture it. It's more than you have ever seen. It is a majestic throne, a great throne.

It's also described as "white." In Scripture, white usually speaks of purity and holiness. This points out that this throne is characterized by unblemished purity and holiness and unsullied justice. Everyone gets what they deserve in this courtroom. We put the statue of the Lady of Justice in front of our courtrooms. You've seen her with the blindfold and the scales of justice. God marks the justice of His great throne by it being white—unblemished, unsullied holiness and justice.

And finally, it's called a "throne." It's speaking of its sovereign decisions. You see, the decisions made here are absolutely sovereign and they are completely and eternally permanent. They are never open to appeal. It is a throne from which a king renders permanent decisions. The picture and image that John intends to paint is one of overwhelming, infinite majesty. That's the picture you should have of this scene. Jesus wanted us to know that if you end up standing before God at this great white throne, it will not be a light occasion. It will literally take your breath away. Your heart will pound through your chest like it has never pounded before. You will literally want to throw up. The awesomeness of that occasion will overwhelm you.

Think for a moment about the one moment in your life when you were most afraid. Can you remember that feeling of intense, overwhelming fear? Nothing mankind has ever experienced in this life, those who will be there, nothing they have ever experienced in this life can compare to the terror of that moment. Imagine it for a moment when the realization hits that God is real, that the Bible is no joke, that reality is as it's portrayed there, that eternity is at stake and that there's no way to change what's about to happen. There's no second chance. There's no excuse. And in this case, there's no mercy. John says, "I saw a great white throne."

What about the judge? He goes on in verse 11 to say: “Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it.” Of course, this is none other than Almighty God. Revelation chapter 22, verses 1 and 3 speaks of the throne of God and of the Lamb. You see, this is a shared throne. The Father and Christ share the throne. But throughout, Scripture is clear that judgment is the special work of the Son. In John chapter 5, verse 22, we read: “not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son.” In John chapter 5, verse 26: “For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself; and He gave Him authority to execute judgment, because He is the Son of Man.”

Scripture is very clear that Jesus Christ will be the judge. Acts chapter 10, verse 42—Peter says to Cornelius, “He ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead.” In Acts 17, a verse we read a few moments ago, the rest of it says this: “He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, and He furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.” The judge of all men, think about this, is to be the very One that Scripture says created them—for by Him, all things were made and without Him, nothing was made that was made—and the One who came into the world to die in order to extend the offer of salvation to every man. He will be the judge, but He’s no longer on a cross dying in humiliation. Now He’s on a throne. And He’s no longer the One extending mercy. There will be no mercy on this occasion from Jesus Christ.

Now look at how John describes Him. He says: “from whose presence earth and heaven fled away.” There is something so terrible, so awesome, so awe-inspiring about the demeanor of Jesus Christ on this occasion that the earth and heaven themselves, the entire creation, wants to shrink away in horror, in terror. The end of verse 11 adds “and no place was found for them.” That’s a very interesting expression. You know what that means? That means that they will be totally, completely destroyed. At the time of this judgment, the great white throne judgment, this universe will be uncreated and will completely go out of existence.

Peter tells us exactly how it will happen. Look back at 2 Peter chapter 3. “The day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar [this is verse 10 of 2 Peter chapter 3] and the elements will be destroyed with an intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up.” That’s what’s going to happen. And it happens in conjunction with this judgment. Everything in the universe will cease to exist except for God, the angels and mankind. David MacLeod puts it like this: “At that moment, the single focus of the universe will be God’s throne. The throne stands isolated, majestic and terrifying. Everything else will have passed away.” Imagine no universe—only God and this great white throne. That’s the picture we have from Revelation chapter 20.

Next, John tells us about the judge. Who will be there at this judgment? Well, we know from other New Testament texts that the fallen angels, the demons, will be there at this judgment. There are a number of texts: Matthew 8:29; 2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6 all tell us about that. But here in Revelation 20, John focuses attention not on the angels, but on the people who were there—the unbelieving dead. Notice verse 12, “I saw the dead . . . standing before the throne.” By the way, the dead standing implies a resurrection, doesn’t it, which is exactly what we’re told as we’ve already seen in other places in the Scripture that all people will eventually be reunited with a body—saints with a glorified body likened to Christ’s body and the dead with a body that’s not described for us, but a body nonetheless. They are resurrected. Verse 5 of chapter 20 says, “The rest of the dead did not come to life.” In other words, those who were resurrected before the millennium is one group, but others did not experience the physical resurrection at that time. The rest of the dead in verse 5 are the dead of verse 12. So, the ones standing before God at this judgment will be all of those who are the unbelieving wicked. Every human being who has refused to turn from his sin and follow Jesus as Lord and Savior will be at this judgment. It’s a terrifying thought to me to think about this, but this is true. If you’re here tonight and you have not repented of your sins, you have not put your faith in Jesus Christ, then Jesus told the apostle John that you would be at this judgment. You can anticipate this reality.

John adds “the small and the great,” the small and the great. In other words, there are no exemptions. There are no exceptions. The important and the unimportant will be there. The rich

and the poor, the young and the old, the low classes and the cultural elite, the uneducated and the intelligentsia, the nobodies and the world's most important and influential people, the super religious hypocrites and the atheists and everything in between. John Phillips, in his work on Revelation, describes it like this:

There is a terrible fellowship there. The dead, small and great, stand before God. Dead souls are united to dead bodies in a fellowship of horror and despair. Little men and paltry women whose lives were filled with pettiness and selfishness and nasty little sins will be there. Those whose lives amounted to nothing will be there, whose very sins were drab and dowdy, mean, spiteful, peevish, groveling, vulgar, common, and cheap. The great will be there, men who sinned with a high hand, with dash, and courage and flair. Men like Alexander and Napoleon, Hitler and Stalin will be present, men who went in for wickedness on a grand scale with the world for their stage and who died unrepentant at last. Now one and all are arraigned and on their way to be damned: a horrible fellowship congregated together for the first and the last time.

Where do these dead come from? Well, there are three expressions that John gives us. He says that death itself will be opened and give up its dead. In other words, all of those who have died but have not yet been resurrected in the first resurrection will be there. Hades—Hades refers either to hell or to the state of death which both believers and unbelievers enter when life is over, that is the grave—here undoubtedly hell itself because these are all unbelievers. And the sea gives up the dead which are in it. That's an interesting addition. Why did John separate the sea from death and Hades? Well, we can't be sure, but both the Greeks and the Romans were very concerned about the proper burial of the body because they believed if you were properly buried, then in the afterlife you could be reunited with your people in the realm of the dead. But if somebody's body was lost at sea, they believed they wouldn't be able to reach their people and the rest of the dead. Now all of that's not true. John may have included those lost at sea to make it clear that no unbeliever will fail to appear at this judgment. Death, Hades, and the sea will be forced to give up their prey. John's point is this: All the unrepentant dead will be there regardless

of where, when or how they died. Everybody'll be there. No exceptions. God won't miss a single person. This is not an event you can skip.

On what basis will they be judged? What is the standard of judgment? Well, there are three standards of judgment. Two of them are mentioned in this passage and one is mentioned elsewhere. Let me start with the one that's mentioned elsewhere. We're told that the law of God will be a standard by which men are judged. Jesus alluded to this in Matthew chapter 7. You remember when He was talking at the end of the Sermon on the Mount about those who would claim to know Him but would not really know Him. And they would say at the judgment, "Lord, look at what we did! And I will say to them, He said, 'depart from Me, you practice lawlessness.'" "The issue," Jesus says, "the reason you're going to have to leave this place and not be with Me, is because you didn't measure up to the standard of the law that was laid out."

This is made more explicit in Romans chapter 2 where Paul makes it clear that men will be judged on the basis of the written law if they have the written law or they'll be judged on the basis of the law written in their conscience if that's all they have, but the law nonetheless. And in Romans chapter 3, Paul says in verses 19 and 20 "Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law," that's all of us—that's those who have the written law and those who've had the law written on their hearts "so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God." So, the Law of God will be one of the standards of judgment.

But there's one added here in Revelation chapter 20, verse 12. It says, "I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and the books were opened." Notice how verse 12 ends "and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds." And that last phrase occurs again at the end of verse 13— "according to their deeds." You see, the books that are opened here are a divine record of human deeds. They may not be actual scrolls or books, we don't know, but the intention is clear. Jesus Christ has a perfect knowledge and recollection of every sin ever; every unbeliever has ever committed. Think about that for a moment. Jesus Christ has a perfect knowledge and recollection of every sin every

sinner has ever committed—whether thought, whether attitude, whether word or whether action. That’s an amazing amount of data when you think about it, isn’t it?

We understand through the advances of technology how data can be stored. I’m always amazed at how much can be stored. I remember, as some of you do, when I got my first computer back in the late, mid to late eighties, it didn’t have a hard drive at all. The only storage, memory storage on the computer was on the floppy disk which held I think 512k. It was just a tiny little bit of storage. I remember when I got my first laptop that had a gig of memory. I thought there’s no way I’ll ever use that. I don’t know why they even bothered getting me that much memory. Then when I saw the first CD that had the entire Encyclopedia Britannica on it, it just blew my mind. Now I have sitting on my desk at home a small black device that’s hardly bigger than a pack of cards and it holds 150 gigs of information. So, it shouldn’t surprise us then that Almighty God holds every detail about every person in His own perfect, infinite mind.

When John says they’ll be judged according to their deeds, he’s including everything, everything that has been done. That includes their actions—that’s obvious from the word “deeds” here in chapter 20, verses 12 and 13. They’ll be judged on the basis of their words. I already read to you Matthew 12 where Jesus says, “every careless word . . . they’ll give accounting for on the day of judgment.” In Luke chapter 12, verses 2 and 3:

there is nothing covered up that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known. Whatever you have said in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in the inner rooms will be proclaimed upon the housetops.

There’s nothing you can hide from God and everything will be revealed—including thoughts, attitudes and motives. Romans 2:16 says that there’s going to come a day when “God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.” You have the Law of God and you have the books that will detail the record of every human deed and every sin they have ever committed. There’s a third standard that’s used at this judgment. Verse 12 adds “and another book was opened, which is the book of life.” This mysterious concept is mentioned a number of times in Scripture and I won’t take you back through all of them. It’s alluded to in a number of places. It occurs six times

in the book of Revelation alone. It's hard to know exactly where this image of the book of life came from. Some believe it comes from the fact that ancient cities often had a written registry of the citizens of that city. You could not enjoy the privileges of citizenship unless your name appeared in that registry. It may be that's the image that lies behind this book of life. What is obvious, however, is regardless of where it came from, it is a record of the elect because the names were written in it before the foundation of the world.

The clearest explanation or fullest description of this book occurs in Revelation chapter 13, verse 8 where it describes it this way. It says "All who dwell on the earth will worship him," that is, the beast during the period of the tribulation "everyone whose name has not been written" and now we learn about the book of life itself, written "from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who has been slain." As one writer put it, "The book of life embodies the redemptive intentions of the Lamb's sacrifice."

Now what's the relationship of these three standards of judgment? What's the relationship between the Law of God, the books and the book of life? What role do each of them play in this judgment? Listen carefully. Each of them bears independent witness to the guilt of the people who appear before the judgment. What did the Old Testament law say? In the mouth of what? two or three witnesses, a matter may be established. Guilt could be established. So, in the case of those who appear before God, before Christ, at this judgment, they have failed to keep God's Law. That's the first witness. They have a huge record of sins recorded by God. That stands as evidence that they have violated God and His character and His Law. That's the second witness. And the third witness is when the book of life is opened, their names do not appear in the divine record of those sinners whom God has chosen for Himself. There is the third witness against those who stand here. And as a result of that, they're found guilty and all that awaits is the sentence and its execution. Look at verses 14 and 15 "Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire." We will still study the eternal state, the eternal state of hell and the eternal state of the new heavens and the new earth, so I'm not gonna get into that tonight. What I want you to see, however, that the sentence is given, and

it is executed. And the sentence passed at the great white throne of judgment will be a just sentence. It will be a public sentence. Just in the sense that no one will be able to claim that they've been unfairly treated, unfairly accused. No one can say they've gotten a bad rap.

For a number of years when I was in college and seminary, I went most Saturday nights to a prison and worked there with the inmates. There were a few men who were genuinely converted I believe, and whom I hope and expect to see in heaven. But many of the men I met there claimed to have been unfairly accused and unfairly treated. There were very few guilty people in prison by their admission. And in some cases, that may be true. Justice in this world can be perverted, but at this throne and with this sentence, no one will be able to claim they've gotten a bad rap. And it'll be public, and it'll also be unchangeable and eternal.

John says, "the second death." What does that mean? What does John mean by the second death? We often talk about three kinds of death—spiritual death, physical death and the second death or eternal death. More accurately, we should say that there is really only one kind of death in three manifestations. There is spiritual death—man is dead in his trespasses and sins as Ephesians 2:1 says. Then comes, because of that spiritual death, physical death. Hebrews chapter 9, verse 27 "It is appointed to men to die once, and after this, the judgment"—physical death. And then, for those who are unrepentant who still remain in spiritual death, there is the second death. This is death prolonged for eternity in the lake of fire. This is eternal dying if you will.

What a trial. It'll be a trial like absolutely no other. John MacArthur in his commentary on this passage writes:

There will be no debate over guilt or innocence. There will be a prosecutor, but no defender, an accuser, but no advocate. There will be an indictment, but no defense mounted by the accused. The convicting evidence will be presented with no rebuttal or cross-examination. There will be an utterly unsympathetic judge and no jury. And there will be no appeal at the sentence that He pronounces. The guilty will be punished eternally with no possibility of parole in a prison from which there is no escape.

What a terrible scene. This is not an easy subject to teach about. It's not an easy, an easy subject for you to hear taught about, but it's a reality that we must understand. This will happen as surely as you are here tonight.

What are the implications of the final judgment for us? There are several I want to call to your attention. These are not all of them, but just a couple for you to think about. First of all, knowing that the great white throne is coming equips Christians to endure injustice here. Paul uses it this way in Colossians chapter 3. In the context, he's urging slaves to serve even under unfair masters, and he says this "For understand that he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality." He says, "Listen, you serve even if you're treated unfairly. It's okay. Understand that a day of reckoning is coming." And as you and I in this world are treated unfairly, and we often are because this is a world characterized by injustice. You may be sitting there even tonight thinking, "I was treated unjustly just this last week. I was passed over for this assignment" or "I was" whatever, you fill in the blank. Knowing there's coming a day of reckoning when our God will right all wrongs enables us to endure injustice here.

Peter puts it this way in 1 Peter chapter 2, verse 23. That even Christ, "when He was being reviled, did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats." Think about Jesus for a moment—the worst treatment, the worst indignity that's ever been done because He was the infinite Son of God and He was treated like a common criminal. It'll never get worse than that. There is no injustice worse than that. And how did Jesus endure that? How did He not call legions of angels to destroy all those people? Peter says, "He kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously." One of the ways was He kept reminding Himself of the righteous judgment of God. It equips us to endure injustice here. Secondly, it enables us to forgive even the worst of wrongs against us. Romans chapter 12, as Paul lays down some very practical principles of Christian living, he says in verse 19 "Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY,' says the Lord.'" As you and I understand that reality, it enables us to forgive and to have a spirit of forgiveness

toward the worst wrongs against us and not to take revenge, not to hold a grudge, not to hold onto a wrong suffered, but let it go. Someday, Jesus Christ will set everything right.

Thirdly, it motivates us to concern for the lost. There are a number of passages. The one that struck me was the Lord's own concern, His own heart of concern prompted by the impending death of the wicked. You see this in the New Testament with Christ crying and weeping over Jerusalem, but you see it in Ezekiel's prophecy as the Lord in Ezekiel 33:11 says, "Say this to them, 'As I live!' declares the Lord GOD, 'I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked [it's coming—death and then judgment], but I take pleasure that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways! Why then will you die, O house of Israel?'" Notice the reality of impending death and its judgment that follows motivates even our great God to appeal to people. Don't go there. Don't be there.

Can I appeal to you tonight? If you're not sure you're in Christ, don't go here. Don't be there that day standing alone before Jesus Christ with every sin you've ever committed revealed and facing eternal judgment for those sins. Turn back. Turn back from your evil ways. Why will you die?

Understanding the reality of this coming day of judgment is a warning to all unbelievers. Not only does it motivate us as Christians to want to share the gospel, to cry out to others, but it serves, and it's intended to serve as a grave warning to every unbeliever. Listen to how Paul puts it again in Romans chapter 2, verse 4, "do you think lightly of the riches of God's kindness?" Think about the riches of God's kindness you enjoy right here today in America in the life you have, in the comfort you enjoy, in the family perhaps that you have, in all of the blessings of this life, do you think lightly of that and His tolerance and His patience? You say, "Well, I mean, God hasn't done anything to me. It's going to be okay." Listen, don't think lightly. God's kindness is intended, Paul says, to lead you to repentance. And if you fail to respond to God's kindness, "then you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and the revelation of the righteous judgment of God." That is a horrific phrase. God says you are storing up wrath for this terrible scene we just studied together. You're stockpiling God's wrath against yourself.

In Hebrews chapter 10, turn there for a moment. Hebrews chapter 10, verse 26. The writer of Hebrews warns those Jews who had attached themselves to the church but had not fully committed themselves to follow Christ. They had not come to the point of repentance and salvation. They were on the brink of deciding to draw back into their old Jewish religion. And the writer of Hebrews says:

if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but [instead] a terrifying expectation of judgment and THE FURY OF A FIRE WHICH WILL CONSUME THE ADVERSARIES [that's what you can expect]. Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, [that's what you do if you don't embrace Jesus Christ. That's, in the mind of God, how you're treating Him. You are trampling the Son of God under your feet. And how much severer punishment do you think that person deserves?] and who has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY." And again, "THE LORD WILL JUDGE HIS PEOPLE." It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

That's a warning. Take it seriously. This isn't something to take lightly. God will not be made the fool.

In 2 Peter chapter 3, verse 9, understand the Lord isn't slow about His promise. You know why God hasn't ended it all and sent Jesus back? It's because He's patient. That's what Peter says here. He's patient specifically toward you. He doesn't wish for you to perish, but for you to come to repentance. God is holding off the return of Christ so that you will have a chance, so that you won't stand at this place, at this judgment before Jesus Christ. God will pour out His wrath against every sin you have ever committed. It will either be on you for all eternity or if you will believe, it will be on His Son on the cross.

One final implication is for Christians. It should fill our hearts with great gratitude. Luke chapter 10, verse 20—Jesus referring to that book of life says, “Don’t rejoice that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven.” Rejoice that your name is in the book of life, that you will not stand at this great white throne, that you will not face this terrifying judge and this absolutely horrific sentence.

Christian, understand this. A just and a holy God has personally witnessed every sin you have ever committed, and He kept a perfect written record. He is bound by His unchanging character to punish every infraction without a single exception. But here’s the joy of the gospel. That same offended God tore the pages of your offenses against Him from the books of heaven, the books referred to in this passage, and He nailed them to the cross of Jesus Christ. You remember Pilate put an inscription above the head of Jesus, nailed it to the cross as the nature of the accusation against Him. It said, “This is Jesus of Nazareth, king of the Jews.” That’s what Pilate nailed to the cross, but God nailed something entirely different. It was a comprehensive list of your sins against Him. Because God is just, not one sin in the history of the universe will ever go unpunished. Praise God ours already were in Christ.

David McLeod tells the story of a Christian wheat farmer in the pioneer days of California. This farm was next to the railroad tracks. And one day when the grain was ripe and dry, a train passed by on the tracks and sparks from the engine set the ripe wheat on fire. And a huge fire erupted, sweeping across that field of wheat. The farmer, in an effort to save what he could of his crops, set a backfire. It burned against the fire in an effort to stop the wall of flames that was sweeping across the field and it worked. He lost half of that year’s crop, but the fire was stopped.

This Christian man, as the story goes, was understandably discouraged as he walked across the charred remains of what was left of what he had worked so hard to grow. And he was tempted to ask why. But suddenly, he came across the remains of the charred body of a hen that had been caught in the rushing sweep and flame of fire. He reached down and turned the hen over with his boot and to his shock, five little chicks came running out from beneath the body of that charred hen. Their mother’s body had protected them from the fire, and they were unharmed.

What an amazing picture of the reality of what Christ has done for us. The fire of God's wrath swept down upon Him at the cross. And the fire of God's wrath will sweep again in this great judgment. It will sweep across mankind, destroying everyone in its path, but it'll never touch us because we are in Christ. "It is appointed to men once to die; after this, the judgment." When will that happen? John says, "And I saw a great white throne." Let's pray together.

Our Father, this is a terrifying scene, one that makes our hearts heavy. And yet, Father, even as our hearts are heavy for those we know and love who don't know You, who apart from Your intervening grace will one day stand in this very place, in that very scene, giving answer to the One who made them and who came to earth to extend salvation to them.

Father, I pray that You would give us a great love for those who are perishing. Give us a heart for the lost. Lord, help us to think of the people around us and realize that this is no imagination. This is not an imagine, an imaginary scene, but rather this is reality and that someday, those we love will stand before You. And Father, give us a desire to communicate the truth. Give us the resolve to share the gospel of Jesus Christ, to warn sinners to turn back.

And Father, I pray that You would fill our hearts with deep, resounding gratitude. May we be filled with joy all of our lives knowing that we are in Christ and that He has taken Your wrath and we will never experience it because we are in Him. Lord, help us to rejoice that our names are written in heaven. We pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.