

Lesson 49

Last week we looked at the great judgment scene at the end of Chapter 20, and we considered several possible interpretations. The two most promising viewpoints are, first, that the judgment is the **first century spiritual** judgment of first century Rome, and, second, that the judgment is a flash-forward in time to the **final judgment** of first century Rome. Those views are very similar, and either could be correct, but I favor the first view because of the parallels it has with the descriptions in the book of Daniel.

When we ended last week, we had gone from choosing the best way of interpreting these verses to doing the actual interpretation, and when class ended we were just about to look at the book of life in verse 15.

Why is **the book of life** mentioned in verse 15? It is mentioned to reinforce one of the primary themes in this book: **God knows!** All throughout this book we have seen two groups: those on the side of Christ and those on the side of Caesar. And for every person on earth, God knows which group that person is in. That was true in the first century, and that is true in the twenty-first century. Those on the side of Christ have their names recorded in the book of life.

Philippians 4:3** — And I intreat thee also, true yokefellow, help those women which laboured with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and with other my fellowlabourers, **whose names are in the book of life.

“The Lord knoweth them that are his” (2 Timothy 2:19). The presence of this book here reinforces that theme: God knows everything, and, more particularly here, God knows everything that Rome has done to harm his people. Those facing this judgment are those **not** found in this book; that is, those who chose Caesar over Christ.

Remember where we first saw this book of life in the book of Revelation.

***Revelation 3:5** — He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I **will not blot out his name out of the book of life**, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels.*

That verse tells us that some of the people suffering this terrible defeat in Chapter 20 had once had their names written in that book of life. God had once

numbered them among his faithful people. But that had changed. They had comprised and fallen. They had proved faithless to God. They had chosen Caesar over Christ. **And now they saw only a blotted out spot where their names had once been written in that great book.** Can you imagine anything worse than seeing a blank spot in that book and knowing that your name had once been there? If there is anything more horrible to contemplate than seeing erasure marks where your name once appeared in the book of life I'm not sure what it could be — and yet don't we all know people who are most likely in that situation? Don't we all know some who have erred from the truth? We have responsibility toward them, and James tells us what it is.

James 5:19-20 — Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins.

But the book of life in verse 15 must be an **end time event**, right? Not really. While I am alive on this earth, my name can be added to that great book, and my name can be blotted out of that great book. **At what point is that no longer true?** At the end of the world? No, but rather at my death. At the moment of my death, if my name is not in that book, then my name will never be in that book. And, likewise, at the moment of my death, if my name is in that book, then my name will forever be in that book. **Death is the finish line for a Christian**, and, in fact, death is the finish line for everyone. So, yes, the book of life will play a big role on the last great day when Jesus comes to claim his own, but that book also plays a big role on **my own last great day** when I depart this world for the next.

But what about **the defeat of death** in verse 14? That has to be the end of the world, right? Why? If I moved the defeat of death in any direction I would **not** move it **later** in time! Instead, I would move it **earlier** in time toward the cross. That was when death was defeated!

Yes, it is certainly true that on that great last day when we are literally raised incorruptible it will come to pass that “death is swallowed up in victory” (1 Corinthians 15:54). And it is certainly true that “the last enemy that shall be destroyed is death” (1 Corinthians 15:26). But it is equally true that death was defeated at the cross and at Christ's resurrection from the dead. Paul told Timothy that Jesus “hath (past tense) abolished death” (2 Timothy 1:10). Hebrews 2:14-15 tells us that Jesus died to “destroy him that had the power of

death, that is, the devil; and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.” And Romans 6:9 tells us “that Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him.” The defeat of death is a past event now, and it was a past event when Revelation was written. Yes, death is still around, but death is not doing very well since the cross. **Death has been on life support for two thousand years!**

So why then is death (and hades, the land of death) shown as being defeated here? Because Rome’s power of death has been removed. Death is personified in Revelation, and nowhere is that clearer than here in verse 13 where Death gives up its dead! **Rome’s defeat was Satan’s defeat, and Satan’s defeat was Death’s defeat.** Rome had used death as a terrible weapon against God’s people, and now that was all over as to Rome.

Why was it all over? Were Christians no longer suffering? Were Christians no longer being put to death? That’s not why. It was all over for death because when a Christian died that first death at the hands of Rome, then Rome’s power came to a complete end. Rome had power over the first death, but Rome had no power over the second death. **God will always have the last word when it comes to death!** When a faithful child of God remained faithful unto death, that person was then and forever after permanently safe from the clutches of Rome and from the death that Rome inflicted. **Faith is the victory!** We are still looking at a **spiritual** rather than a **physical** event in these verses.

But if verses 11-15 are describing a first century judgment rather than the final judgment at the end of all time, we might ask whether that **earlier first century judgment** is described anywhere else in the Bible using those terms. I think the answer is yes, it is. I think Peter tells us about it.

*1 Peter 4:12-19 — Beloved, think it not strange concerning **the fiery trial** which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: But rejoice, inasmuch as **ye are partakers of Christ’s sufferings**; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy. If ye be **reproached for the name of Christ**, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you: on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men’s matters. Yet if **any man suffer as a Christian**, let him not be*

*ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf. For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God? And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear? Wherefore let **them that suffer according to the will of God** commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator.*

Look at the judgment there in 1 Peter 4:17 — is that the **future** judgment at the end of time? No. Peter tells us it is not. He says, “for **the time is come** that judgment must begin at the house of God.” **That judgment was something that was already occurring.**

What did that judgment involve? How was it a judgment that began at the house of God? Peter also tells us that. Five times in those verses, Peter describes the persecution that Christians were **at that time** experiencing at the hands of Rome. How was that a judgment? It was a judgment because of the decision that had to be made by one undergoing that persecution — remain faithful to Christ or instead renounce Christ. That was a hard decision when faced with death and torture. And isn't that what Peter tells us in verse 18 — “if the righteous **scarcely** be saved”? There will not be anyone **scarcely** saved at the end of all time. On that day, the saved will be rising in the air to forever be with Christ. **There is nothing scarce about that!** The scarceness comes with the terrible decision that first century Christians were called upon to make — give up their life for Christ, or save their life and forfeit Christ. I don't think any one of us can really know what that was like if we have never had a gun to our head (or a family member's head) and heard the command to renounce Christ or die. Those who remained faithful were saved — but only through a tremendous struggle. That was their judgment, and that judgment began at the house of God. But — **and this is Peter's point** — **if a child of God had to go through a trial like that, what must await those who are opposed to God?** What sort of judgment and trial must await the ungodly and the sinner? **If that is the judgment suffered by the Christian having the gun at his head, what sort of judgment must await the one holding that gun?** I think we are seeing the answer to that question here in Revelation 20.

So what is left in this book of Revelation? Chapters 21 and 22 conclude the book with a beautiful description of the triumphant and victorious church. In fact,

nowhere will you find a more beautiful description of the church than in these final chapters of the Bible. **The Old Testament ends with a curse. Let's see how the New Testament ends.**

Chapter 21

Before we study this chapter, let's ask this question: after studying the first twenty chapters of this book, **what do we expect to see here in Chapter 21?**

Remember, all throughout the book, God's faithful people have been pictured as safe in heaven even while many of them were still living on earth and facing persecution. If they remain faithful, their security is so certain that God pictures them as already being safe in heaven. On the other hand, the persecuting Romans have been repeatedly referred to in this book as those that dwell upon the earth. The image has been that of God keeping his people safe while he punishes and judges the Romans who were persecuting his people.

But now what has happened? Rome has been judged. Rome has been cast into the lake of fire along with everything and everyone else who might harm God's people. In short, God has created **a new environment** for his people. The old environment is no more. Rome is gone.

Did all of that **literally** occur? Did it occur **physically**? No and no. The focus of this book has been on spiritual deliverance and spiritual judgment, and that focus has not changed. Do you mean to say that Christians continued to face persecution in this new environment? Yes, they did, and the Romans continued to thrive. But you know what? **Things are not what they seem!** That is one of the central themes of this book, and just as the focus of the book has not changed, neither has that theme changed. God is still trying to get his people to see things as they really are — which is to say that God is trying to get his people to see things as God himself sees things.

Yes, but that doesn't sound much like a victory, does it? God's people are still being persecuted, right? The Romans are still very much in charge of things, right? It doesn't seem like much has changed, right? That's all correct — **from an earthly viewpoint**. In the words of Solomon, those objections are all correct — **when viewed under the sun**. But what if we lift up our eyes unto the hills from whence cometh our help (Psalm 121:1)? What if we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen? What if we look

not at the things that are temporal, but at the things that are eternal (2 Corinthians 4:18)? Then how do things look? **Chapter 21 answers that question!**

Yes, when viewed from earth, it looked like Rome will still very much in power and very much in charge. How did Rome look when viewed from heaven? Rome looked like a beast and a false prophet that had been cast alive into a lake of fire. That is how God saw Rome, and God wanted his people to see Rome in exactly that same way. Rome was no threat to the faithful people of God! “This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith” (1 John 5:4). “Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life” (Revelation 2:10). God’s people could rest secure in God’s promises.

And the church? How did the church look when viewed from earth? The church looked weak and foolish (1 Corinthians 1:27). The church looked base and despised (1 Corinthians 1:28). There weren’t very many people in the church who were wise after the flesh or mighty or noble (1 Corinthians 1:26). From an earthly viewpoint, the church didn’t look like much. The church had none of the beauty and grandeur of Rome; the church had none of the pomp and circumstance of Rome. Like Christ, the church of Christ was despised and rejected of men.

That is what the church looked like when viewed **from earth**. But what did the church look like when viewed **from heaven**? **Chapter 21 answers that question!**

In my opinion, there is no more beautiful description of the Lord’s church found anywhere than the description we see here in Chapter 21. The first century church needed to see the church as it really was, and so God shows it to them. God shows them the church in all of its beauty and power. And you know what, it is not just the first century church who needs to see the church as it really is — that is also true of the twenty-first century church!

How will the church be described in this chapter? We will hear about the **newness** of its environment — a new heaven and a new earth. We will hear about its **beauty** — golden streets and jeweled walls. We will hear about its **purity** — a beautiful bride. We will hear about its **stability and strength** — huge walls and a city four-square. We will hear about its **importance** and its **testimony** — a source of light to those living in darkness. And there can be no doubt about the **power** of the church — Rome left the building in the previous chapter!

If we are worried and discouraged about the state of the church today, then Chapter 21 is the chapter for us! I have said it before, and I'll say it again — when we view the church as God views the church, then this book of **Revelation** will become a book of **revolution**! God's word will change us if we let it — so let's do just that! If we ever have doubts about the power and beauty and relevance of the church, then let's allow God's word to change how we view the church.

Revelation 21:1

1 And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea.

In Revelation 20:11, the earth and the sky fled from the presence of God, and no place was found for them. That was the end of the **old environment with Rome**; now has come the time for the **new environment without Rome**, and that is how Chapter 21 begins.

The figure of heaven and earth passing away is a common one in the Bible. God depicts the judgment of the ungodly by **figuratively** bringing their world to an end just as one day God will **literally** bring the entire world to an end. This is another example where God is using a literal future event to figuratively describe some other event. And God has done that same thing elsewhere in the Bible.

In Isaiah 13, God dismantles the earth and the stars to depict the judgment of Babylon by the Medes.

Isaiah 13:10 — For the stars of heaven and the constellations thereof shall not give their light: the sun shall be darkened in his going forth, and the moon shall not cause her light to shine.

Isaiah 13:13 — Therefore I will shake the heavens, and the earth shall remove out of her place, in the wrath of the LORD of hosts, and in the day of his fierce anger.

In Isaiah 34, the heavens are dissolved and rolled together as a scroll to depict a judgment against Edom.

Isaiah 34:4 — *And all the host of heaven shall be dissolved, and the heavens shall be rolled together as a scroll: and all their host shall fall down, as the leaf falleth off from the vine, and as a falling fig from the fig tree.*

Matthew 24 describes the judgment of Jerusalem in a similar way.

Matthew 24:29 — *Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken.*

Joel described the events leading up to the establishment of the church in Acts 2 using similar language.

Joel 2:30-31 — *And I will shew wonders in the heavens and in the earth, blood, and fire, and pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and the terrible day of the LORD come.*

Just as the apocalyptic language in Matthew 24:29 depicted the destruction of the Jewish world in Jerusalem, so the same language here in verse 1 depicts the destruction of the Roman world. Just as things would never again be the same for Jerusalem, so things would never again be the same for Rome. Their old world was gone. Something else was about to take its place. And that was also true for the establishment of the church in Acts 2, which was described in Joel 2 using similar apocalyptic language. After Acts 2, the old world would never be the same, and so God, through the prophet Joel, pictures a dismantling of the old world.

What are we saying? **What we are saying is that earth-shattering events are described in the Bible using earth-shattering language!** And is that really so surprising? Is there some other sort of language we would expect God to use to describe such momentous events?

Is the new heaven and the new earth in verse 1 the end of the world? The context says no. The time frame says no. The many examples of similar language in the Bible describing events other than the end of the world say no. But let's hold off on finally answering that question until we read the rest of Chapter 21.

One thing we can say with certainty now is that the phrase “a new heaven and a new earth” need not describe the end of the world, although it can be used that way, and in fact is used that way in 2 Peter 3:13. But the same language can also be used to describe other dramatic changes of environment, as we saw in Isaiah, Matthew, and Joel.

The creation of a new heaven and a new earth can depict a great judgment (such as the judgment of Jerusalem AD 70 or the judgment at the end of time), the removal of some specific enemy (such as Babylon or Edom), or some other radical change in circumstances (such as the establishment of the church). The particular change in environment that is under consideration must be determined from the context, which is what we will do as we study the remainder of the chapter.

Notice the end of verse 1 — “**and there was no more sea.**” We talked about the symbolic use of the **sea** in an earlier lesson. In this book, the sea is used two ways — to denote wickedness and to denote separation from God. So, if the sea is no more, then whatever is about to be described in this chapter will lack those two things — wickedness and separation from God.

With those two clues, don't we already see the **church** in verse 1? Don't we see the blood-bought body of Christ cleansed in the blood of the Lamb? Don't we see the people of God who can enter the holy of holies and boldly approach the throne of grace?

But is verse 1 then suggesting somehow that the church did not already enjoy these blessings? No. The church has enjoyed those blessings from the moment of its creation by God in Acts 2. There has never been a time when the church was not cleansed by the blood of Christ. There has never been a time when the church could not boldly approach God's throne.

So why then does verse 1 say there was no more sea as if the church only now began enjoying those blessings? Verse 1 is doing something we have seen many times before in this book — verse 1 is restating and reemphasizing something that the church already enjoyed but that the church did not fully appreciate. Verse 1 is describing a new manifestation of a blessing that the church already enjoyed.

As I think we will see, this chapter contains a beautiful description of the church, and particularly of the church after it came through the Roman persecution. But, and **here is the key point**, these beautiful descriptions do not apply to the church **only** after the Roman persecution. These beautiful descrip-

tions were **always true** of the church, from the day of its establishment in Acts 2, and they remain true of the church in the present day. God's view of the church has not changed! Yes, God may show us the church in different ways, and yes God may bless and protect the church in different ways at different times, but God's love and care for the church are unwavering and unchanging. That is one of the most beautiful promises in this book!

Revelation 21:2-4

2 And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. 4 And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.

Are these verses describing the end of all time? **How could they be?** Look at verse 2. Does that verse show the church leaving this earth and going to heaven as will happen at the end of all time? No. Verse 2 shows precisely the opposite! Verse 2 shows the church "coming down from God out of heaven." How could that be describing the end of the world?

And another thing, how could these verses be describing **heaven**? Verse 2 tells us that what is being described here is coming "**out of heaven**." Even if we didn't know for sure what was being described here, isn't verse 2 enough for us to know that heaven is **not** being described? If I had a giant box up here, and I asked you to guess what was inside the giant box, would anyone guess that what was inside the giant box was the giant box itself? No. You might not

know what I was about to pull out of the giant box, but you would certainly know that whatever it was, it was not the giant box itself. Likewise, whatever is coming down **out of heaven**, we can be certain that it is **not** heaven. We are not seeing heaven come down from God out of heaven in verse 2!

Why do I stress that point? Because many people who read this chapter treat verse 2 the same way they treat the numerous time frame verses in this book — which is to say that they read it, and then they forget it or ignore it. Let's not do that. Let's remember verse 2 as we study the other verses in this chapter. These verses are not describing heaven. They are instead describing something that has come down from God out of heaven. That's not me saying that; that's verse 2 saying that.

So what is being described then? What is coming down from God out of heaven? Look at the clues! It is the **holy city**. It is the **new Jerusalem**. It is prepared as a **bride**. Many more clues will follow, but from those clues alone don't we already know that this holy city is the **church**?

But, wait, some may say — **that's not what our songbook says!** We have many songs that take language from this chapter and apply it to heaven. **Two points in response.** First, there may be many good arguments against what I am saying here, but telling me that it violates our songbook is not one of those good arguments! But second, there is nothing at all that is wrong about those songs! **Why is heaven beautiful?** Heaven is beautiful because God is there. And **why is the church beautiful?** For the same reason! The church is beautiful because God dwells there with his people.

***Ephesians 2:22** — In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.*

***Matthew 18:20** — For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.*

So even if these verses are describing the church rather than describing heaven, **heaven and the church are beautiful for the same reason.** And the church in heaven will be just as beautiful as the church on earth, and again that is true for the same reason — the church is the body of Christ and the habitation of God.

But why does verse 2 picture the church as **coming down from God out of heaven**? Several reasons.

One reason is to show the contrast with the beasts of Rome that came up out of the earth and sea. **The church is not the product of man!** The eternal kingdom was not made with human hands. Unlike Caesar worship and the other false religions of this world, the church of Christ did not originate from man. The church was established by God.

Let me be very blunt on this point: there is no denomination that can ever claim to have come down from God out of heaven, and in fact I don't know any denominations that do make such a claim about themselves. If you read their websites, they will trace their history back to the actions of men, not to the actions of God. Don't believe me? Here is how the Baptists themselves describe their origin:

American Baptists, Southern Baptists and all the scores of other Baptist bodies in the U.S. and around the world grew out of a common tradition *begun in the early 17th century*. ... The *origins of Baptist thought* and practice can be seen in the late 16th century in English Congregationalism. ... The *earliest Baptist churches* (1609-1612), although comprised of English-speaking congregants, flourished in Holland, where religious toleration was much greater than in England.

Does that sound like they are claiming to have ever come down from God out of heaven? It doesn't sound to me like they make any claim to have even existed prior to the seventeenth century! Does that sound like a product of God or like a product of man? And that's not me describing the Baptists! That is the Baptists describing the Baptists! And the same is true of every other denomination; they are all man-made, and they will be the first to tell you that! And if you are a Baptist, please consider this point very carefully! **From whence came ye (Revelation 7:13)?**

There is a great contrast in this book of Revelation, and in fact all throughout the Bible, between the works of God and the works of man. The eternal kingdom of Christ, his church, is a work of God, not a work of man. The church is the stone cut without human hands, and it is that stone that will sweep away all of the works of man, be they kingdoms of man or religious organizations of man. There is but one eternal kingdom.

A **second reason** the church is shown coming down out of heaven is that God's people have been referred to throughout this book as dwelling in heaven (even while still on earth) and the wicked have been referred to as those who dwell

on earth. Now that the wicked and their wicked Roman world are gone, the church is pictured as returning to a world that has been made new. God had pictured them safe in heaven while he took care of the Roman problem on earth, and now that the Roman problem has been resolved, God pictures the church returning to earth. But this earth is not the same one they left because this earth is a Rome-free earth. That great enemy of God's people is no more.

Why are there no more tears or death or pain? Verse 4 tells us — it is because the former things have passed away. What are the former things that have just passed away? The blood thirsty harlot and the two beasts are gone. Rome is no more. Rome has been weighed and found wanting. Rome has been judged.