 From Michelangelo’s *The Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel, completed 1512

**THE JUDGMENT OF THE DEAD**

Episode Nineteen: Revelation 20:11-15

There are no more unpopular doctrines in the Bible than that of the Final Judgment and Hell. The Pew Foundation continues to survey American beliefs on Hell. They list all the demographics: gender, race, religion and age. The verdict is in: belief in hell is declining, even among evangelicals. But Millennials and Gen Z’s have a particular aversion to the idea that a loving God would judge our behavior, and then condemn untold billions of people to an eternal, conscious hell. Yet, Jesus talked about hell more than anyone else in the Bible. When rightly understood, the biblical concept of hell is indispensable to his gospel.

1. **THE GREAT WHITE THRONE.** [Rev. 20:11&12]  *“Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and the heavens fled from his presence, and there was no place for them.”* [vs. 1]

* *Great* in status, power, and authority. *White* in purity and holiness. And a  *Throne* with kingly sovereignty.
* *…and him who was seated on it…* Who is this unnamed Judge. The Bible says that he is Jesus. *“Moreover, the Father judges no one, but entrusts all judgment to his Son.”* [John 5:22] *“And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man.”* [John 5:27] *“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people from one another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats…”* [Matt. 25:31&32]
* *“The earth and the heavens fled from his presence…”* This is a frightening picture of Jesus. He is no longer gentle Jesus, meek and mild…a lamb led mute to the slaughter. So terrible is his presence that all of creation flees from it, and yet there is no place for it to hide. This is a graphic way of saying that there will be no place in creation to run to, disappear into, or hide behind. *”They called to the mountains and the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath*  *of the Lamb...’”* [Rev. 6:16]

1. **THE JUDGED.** *“And I saw the dead, both 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 done according to what they had done.”*  [Rev. 20:12&13]

* *“And I saw the dead, both great and small, standing before the throne…”* Who are these dead? **They are not those redeemed by Christ (the Saints)**. For they have already been raptured, both the living and the dead. They will appear before another judgment: The *Bema* Seat of Christ as spoken of in Romans 14:10 and 2 Corinthians 5:9. In ancient times the *Bema* seat was a raised platform in the Olympics where a judge stood to pronounce who came in first, second, or third. It later became the place where a Roman official stood to pronounce judgment on a citizen. In the New Testament, we are told that all believers will stand before Christ to be judged according to our works as Christians. We will have escaped the Great White Throne Judgment and hell on the basis of Christ’s work on our behalf. But salvation by grace does not absolve us of giving an account of our words and actions. Jesus often spoke of rewards to be gained for faithful service to him. Though all the saints will inherit the new heaven and earth by grace, they will experience different ranks and rewards in it based on their sanctification in this world. St. Paul describes the *Bema Seat Judgment*  this way:

*"If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames."* [1 Corinthians 3:12-15]

* *“…standing before the throne of God…”*  [vs. 12] This is not a trial to determine guilt. These are the guilty waiting to be sentenced. In this life, we judge God and find him wanting. We question his actions, complain about his decisions, and find fault with the way he has dealt with us. The number one problem that Gen Z’s have with Christianity is how a sovereign and good God can allow injustice, death, destruction, and misery in this world. **But on this day, he will judge and find wanting, those who judged and found him wanting—so they turned away from him to follow after gods of their own making**.
* *“…and books were opened…*[vs 12]God keeps a book on everyone’s life—every thought, word, and action. Some are good, most fall short of the glory of God. The lines of the book of everyone’s life give proof of St. Paul’s words: *“There is not one righteous, not even one.”* [Romans 3:10] Even though some are better than others, none can measure up to God’s standard of holiness: *“For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”* [Romans 3:23] Therefore, those who claim to be good enough to earn heaven, and escape hell, are condemned by these words: *“For the wages of sin is death…”* [Romans 6:23] St. Paul’s words are an echo of God’s words to Adam, *“But you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.”* [Genesis 2:17] **That death is immediately spiritual, eventually physical, and finally eternal**. For death is ultimately separation from God, the source of all life.

*“The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books.”* [vs. 12] *“The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what they had done.”*  [vs. 13] Those who depend on their good deeds and moral lifestyle, as recorded in the book of their life, to earn their way to heaven, will be surprised and horrified to discover that to fall short of the glory of God is to fall into the place reserved for sinners.

* *“Another book was opened which was the book of life.”* There is another way to salvation—**the Only Way**! When we couldn’t live the sinless life necessary to please God, or pay the death penalty that our sins deserve, God the Son came to earth and lived that sinless life for us, experienced all the miserable curses of sin, and then died in our place. His suffering on the cross included an eternity of hell, separation from his Father, and physical death. If we receive Christ’s gracious work, as the basis of our salvation by faith, then our names are written in the ***Book of Life.***  If we don’t accept Christ’s work as the basis of our salvation, then we are reduced to depending on our own works [that which is written in our personal book of life]

If they are dependent on their good works, there is only one end for them: eternal separation from God. The Bible calls that hell.

1. **THE FINAL JUDGMENT.** *“Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.”* [Revelation 20:14&15]

* **The final judgment on Death**. *“Then death…thrown into the lake of fire.”* [vs. 14] Death came about by sin. Death is one of the curses of sin. It is our final enemy. Jesus defeated it with his resurrection from the dead. As St. Paul said, it no longer has a sting for saved Christians or victory over them. [1 Cor. 15:35] After it is thrown into hell, it will never be seen again in the new heaven and earth of Revelation 21&22.

* **The final judgment on Hades.** *“…and hades…thrown into the lake of fire.”* [vs. 14] Hades is the Greek word for the Hebrew, *Sheol—*the place of where the dead go. The Greeks actually called their hell *Hades*. We believe that humans are made up of at least two parts [many believe three: body, soul & spirit]: 1) **the body**, made by God from the dust (or basic elements and chemicals) of the earth [Gen. 2:7]. 2) the human is made different than the other creatures of earth because God breathed his spirit (or very essence) into the human body. Therefore, that spirit within each human, whether an unredeemed sinner or saved saint, cannot die—anymore than God himself could die. **Spirit is eternal**! When the body dies, it goes into the grave where it eventually returns to dust or is burned and turns to ashes, or goes into the sea where it is eaten by creatures or deteriorates.

**But the spirit of the person cannot die, so at death it has to go somewhere**. The Bible speaks of two separate places: 1) **The spirit of the saint goes immediately to heaven to be with God**. St. Paul said, *“To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.”*  [2 Cor. 5:6-8] Jesus said to the thief on the cross, *“Today you will be with me in paradise.”*  [Luke 23:43] St. Paul says that paradise is the *third heaven* which is where God is. [2 Cor. 12:2]. So, the spirits of the dead saints are now in heaven with God, awaiting the resurrection of their bodies, which will be glorified and made sinless in the time it takes to blink an eye. [I Cor. 15:50-54] After Jesus died, his body was put in a tomb, and the thief’s body was most likely tossed into some unmarked pauper’s grave. But when Jesus breathed his last with the words, *“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit…”* [Luke 23:456] then his spirit went immediately to heaven, along with the spirit of the dead thief. So it will be for all saints who die before the rapture.

2) In the same way, the spirit of the damned also must have an interim abode after death. Jesus described that place in his parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man [Luke 16:19-31] The rich man ends up in torment in a place Jesus calls *HADES*—not hell. Hades cannot be the same as hell because Hades will be thrown into Hell. [Rev. 14] It, like death, is only temporary, but hell is forever. *“The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever!”* [Rev. 19:3] *“They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.”* [Rev. 20:10] Even Jesus spoke of the eternality of hell and its torment when he said, *“Where the worm never dies and the fire is never quenched (or extinguished).* [Mark 9:44]

Like the redeemed saints, the damned will be released from the temporary abode. Their spirits too will be reunited with their bodies—resurrected not at the rapture, but after Armageddon. Not for glory, but for judgment. Not to have glorified bodies, but, nevertheless to have eternal bodies that cannot be destroyed, together with spirits that cannot die either. At first, there will be relief to be out of Hades. But they will go from the proverbial frying pan into the fire. Hades was a temporary place of torment. Hell will be an eternal place of unspeakable horror.

* **The Final Judgment of the Unredeemed Sinner.** *“Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the Lake of Fire.”* [vs. 15] This should cause us no joy. It should at least sober us. We are foolish if it doesn’t terrify us. It should never be the incentive to get saved or submit to Christ. Our service to Christ should be out of love and gratitude. Surely, it should be a motive to share the gospel with our loved ones—and even those who would count themselves our enemies. None of us could wish this kind of eternity on anyone. Here are some biblical truths we might want to comprehend for our own faith, as well as understand in handling a doctrine that is exceedingly unpopular with skeptics and troubling to believers:

1. We can’t sugar coat hell. I**t is a biblical doctrine that cannot be denied by those who hold to the fundamentals of our Faith.** Jesus believed in the reality of hell. He spoke about it more than any other person in the Bible. We cannot follow Jesus as our Savior and Lord, and then deny or reinterpret what he plainly taught because it troubles us or makes our faith unpalatable to others. Hell is real. Hell is forever. Hell is a place of conscious suffering. Hell is not a place that annihilates. Hell is not a remedial place to bring the sinner to their senses, so they might eventually be paroled to heaven. As Dante wrote, above the gates of hell are written the words, “Abandon hope all ye who enter here.”
2. **Our understanding of hell must come from Scripture alone, and not from speculation or vain imagination** like that in Dante’s *Divine Comedy.* Preachers have too often gone into flights of fancy to describe the horrors of hell in order to scare people out of it, or to intimidate others in order to get them to toe the line. The doctrine of hell is too profound to be trifled with on the one hand, or subjected to our own vain imaginations on the other.
3. **We must handle the doctrine of hell with great care**, especially when dealing with those who find it offensive or impossible to understand why a loving God would condemn anyone to eternal, conscious suffering.
4. **When God reveals truths like heaven or hell, he is reduced to doing so in words and images that we can understand**. We are like children, peering through a glass darkly. No human words can describe the glories that are heaven, nor the horrors that are hell. Even if they could, we would not be able to grasp them with our limited experiences and finite minds. Therefore, we must handle phrases like *the lake of fire, bottomless pit, outer darkness,* or other phrases, on the basis of our own human ability to comprehend them.

When Jesus was talking to his disciples one day, they asked what hell was like. At that moment they were passing by a valley called *Gehenna* just outside old Jerusalem. It was a place of revulsion and notoriety to Jews. During earlier centuries, Canaanites, and even apostate Jews, brought their children there to be sacrificed in the fires to the god Moloch. In Jesus’ day, it was the city garbage dump. Fires burned there day and night to consume the refuse. Lepers lived in the caves that honeycombed the Valley of Gehenna. The diseased, beggars and the poor rummaged through the garbage to find food or other recyclables. It was a place of stench, disease, and depravity. As Jesus pointed to the smoke that rose up from that place called Gehenna, he said to his disciples, “That’s what hell is like.” [Mark 9] Think of the worse possible place you know—a place where you would most dread to be, even for a moment—and think, “I don’t want to go to that place, or one that is infinitely worse, for eternity!

**Hell is impossible to describe, much less conceive of! We are reduced, in the end, to pale imagery of a reality beyond us.**

1. **The ultimate meaning of hell, beyond anything Dante could ever conceive of or describe in his *Inferno****.* It is to be separated from God forever—a state that no person has ever experienced (other than Jesus Christ), or will until the Final Judgment. Imagine a place where not even a single molecule of God’s Person or attributes filters through! If he is light, not a particle of light will enter. It will be beyond outer darkness. If he is life, then hell will be a place of utter deadness of heart, spirit, and hope. If he is love, not even a millesecond of love will ever be felt there. If he is grace, it will be a graceless place. If he is holy, it will be a place of utter depravity. Whatever he is, or whatever he does for us now, will be totally, irrevocably and endlessly devoid of it. There will be no restrainer of evil. No sun. No rain. No kindness. No hope. No care. *Ad infinitum, ad nauseam*. It will be horror beyond anything anyone can begin to imagine or express.
2. **Hell will be richly deserved by all that go there**. In this life, like Adam and Eve, we all want autonomy—the freedom to run our own lives, to make our own decisions, to go our own way without anyone’s interference. So the sinful human, like fallen Adam and Eve, run and hide from God. Either they are atheists who do not believe he exists. Or agnostics who equivocate on who he is. Or deists who acknowledge his existence but not his involvement in our lives. Or pagans who reshape him into a god of their own liking. Or people who live as if he has no relevance in their lives, except for those emergencies when they might cry out to him for temporary help. Or religionists who use him to accomplish their selfish ends. Or secular postmodern people who turn to creation rather than the Creator.

But these people don’t live at the logical conclusions of their thinking. Though they live as if there is no God, or that he is irrelevant to their daily lives, they are still in his presence. They are recipients of his common grace. The rain falls on the good and evil alike—as does the sun.

**But hell is them getting exactly what they have always longed for**—a place where there is no God. Only then will they understand the truth God tried to tell them: a life without God really is hell. **God did not send them to hell, they made their own choices that sent them to their own eternal destination**.

1. **It must be eternal, because the spirit cannot die**. That too, they have chosen by their refusal to listen to God. Our conclusion: HELL IS REAL IT IS NEVERENDING. IT IS CONSCIOUS. YOU DON’T WANT TO GO THERE1 NOR DO YOU WANT ANYONE ELSE TO GO THERE.