

**Heaven-part 2**                      **Daniel Cote**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Congregational Church**   **11-17-24**  
**Scripture Reading:**   **Revelation 20:11-15**  
**Sermon Text:**           **Revelation 21:1-9**  
**Opening**

In June of 2006, Warren Buffet, the world's second-richest man at the time, announced that he would donate 85 percent of his \$44 billion fortune to five charitable foundations. Commenting on this extreme level of generosity, Buffet said: "There is more than one way to get to heaven, but this is a great way." But Jesus unequivocally says in John 14:6, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me."

The former New York mayor, Michael Bloomberg, sat down for an interview with Daniel Halper of the Washington Examiner a few days before his 50th college reunion. Halper writes, His mortality has started dawning on him, at 72. And he admitted he was a bit taken aback by how many of his former classmates had been appearing in the "in memoriam" pages of his school newsletter. But if he senses that he may not have as much time left as he would like, he has little doubt about what would await him at a Judgment Day. Pointing to his work on gun safety, obesity and smoking cessation, [Bloomberg] said with a grin: "I am telling you if there is a God, when I get to heaven I'm not stopping to be interviewed. I am heading straight in. I have earned my place in heaven. It's not even close."

But Paul informs us in Titus 3:5-6 that entry to heaven will not be on the basis of works, saying, "He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior."

Like many people, it seems Buffet and Bloomberg have made their own salvation plan, but God has made His salvation plan known to us through the Bible and His Son. We cannot dictate to God our terms for entering His heaven. True faith in Jesus is our only hope of gaining access to the kingdom of God, which is heaven.

### **Introduction**

The prospect of facing God in judgment causes fear in many, but as Christians, we do not need to fear. However, we do need to be ready. The New Testament describes two distinctly different judgments: first, the Judgment Seat of Christ, and second, The Great White Throne Judgment. Christians will be judged at the judgment seat of Christ described in our Call to Worship from 2 Corinthians 5:10, where Paul, who is speaking to Christians, says, "...we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive compensation for his deeds done through the body, in accordance with what he has done, whether good or bad."

Jesus made it clear in the Parable of the Talents found in Matthew 25 that when He returns, He will require an accounting from His servants, and of course, that is each of us who believe in Him. Jesus came to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many. He calls us to serve Him and bear fruit, which are good deeds glorifying God (Matt 20:26-28; John 15:8). So the strong indication is that the question Jesus will ask us when we stand before Him at the judgment seat is, How did you serve me with your time, talents, and treasure during your time on Earth? We need to be ready to answer that question this very day; we must always be ready to answer that question because tomorrow is not guaranteed.

In the Parable of the Talents (Matt 25:14-30), the servants receive different rewards according to what they had done in service to God. The servants in the parable are all who follow Christ, and at the judgment seat of Christ, they will not be judged for their sins but for what they have done to serve God with the time, talents, and resources that He has entrusted to them.

Believers are secure in their salvation by faith in Christ, for we have this promise in Hebrews 8:12: "For I will be merciful toward their wrongdoings, And their sins I will no longer remember." Furthermore, We have this assurance in 1 John 2:2 that Christ "...is the propitiation for our sins..." By our faith in Christ, our sins have been forgiven. Out of love for Christ and by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, we seek to put sin to death in our lives, and as Jesus teaches us in the Parable of the Talents, we must serve Him on this Earth. By our faith in Christ, we will gain entry into heaven, but our work for God will determine our rewards in heaven. The analogy I've used before is to think of heaven as Fenway Park. I know that is a stretch for some of you (Yankees fans). Everyone who has a ticket gets into the park, but some will have better seats depending on how much they invested. Every true believer will enter heaven, but rewards will be given commensurate with our service to God. The Bible is not very specific about the nature of those rewards, but I would advise this: invest all that you are and have into the kingdom of God, for it will be your eternal home, and God promises to reward the faithful who serve Him.

### **Exposition of Scripture Reading**

Unbelievers will be judged at the Great White Throne in the scene described in our Scripture reading, verse 11, which pictures a great throne descending to the Earth. Seated upon it is God the Father, or perhaps both, God the Father and God the Son. Arrayed before them will be the resurrected unbelievers of all ages. If you find the Great White Throne judgment scary and worrisome, you do not need to worry because if you believe in Christ, you will not be there! The Great White Throne judgment is for those who have rejected Christ and His moral teaching.

The Great White Throne Judgment is a pivotal event where big changes come to pass in the universe. John says that from the presence of the throne, the earth and heaven fled away. Our present heaven and earth are the universe we inhabit. Since the fall of Adam and Eve, our present Earth and universe have been decaying and running out of energy, subject to the Second Law of Thermodynamics. That is not as complicated as it sounds. Think of an old-fashioned clock that you wind up. Over time, it runs out of energy and stops. In the same way, our present universe is running out of energy and will one day be made new by our God, and our present heaven and earth will be replaced by God with a new heaven and new earth. But not before the final judgment of those who have rejected Christ.

Last time, we learned that believers in Jesus of all ages are part of the first resurrection, and they reign with Christ for a thousand years during the millennium described in Revelation 20. In Revelation 20:5, John says, "The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed..." John describes the fate of the rest of the dead, who are unbelievers of all ages. These individuals participate in the second resurrection after the millennium and awake from death to the Great White Throne Judgement. It is a terrifying thought, but it is not something that those who truly believe in Christ need to lose a moment of sleep over.

However, my students and others sometimes ask how we could possibly be happy in heaven, knowing that some of our loved ones will not be with us. I would answer this way. First, our God loves His creatures so much that He allows them to freely choose to love Him or not. We each must choose. Our God will not force people to love Him because forced love is not love. Second, those we love who do not darken the doorway of a church, who have never sung praises to God, who have never done works in service to God would be miserable doing these very things for all eternity, which is part of what we will be doing in heaven. Those who have rejected God, or perhaps even hated God, would be miserable and suffer greatly if, all of a sudden, they were in a place where loving, worshipping, and serving God were continual events. I think C.S. Lewis has rightly concluded that the gates of hell are locked from the inside. No one who rejects God in this life is going to want to be subject to God in the next life.

In verse 13 of our Scripture Reading, we learn that the unbelieving of all time will be judged according to their deeds. The unbelieving have rejected Christ, and therefore, His sacrifice on the cross does not cover their sins, and so they stand before God on their own merits. When believers stand before God, the sacrifice of Christ will cover their sins. But for those who reject Christ, the same cannot be said, and so they will stand before Christ on their own merits. It is sin that alienates us from God, and without the forgiveness that comes through faith in Jesus, no amount of good deeds will satisfy God.

It seems there are degrees of punishment in hell, so Hitler and Stalin will experience far more torment than the religious skeptic who spent Sunday mornings fishing. In support of this, Jesus says in Luke 12:47–48

**47** “The servant who knows the master’s will and does not get ready or does not do what the master wants will be beaten with many blows.

**48** But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.

The message seems to be that unbelievers with a great knowledge of Christ will answer for their lack of response to the gospel, while those who had less knowledge about Christ will be punished less severely. Joseph Stalin comes to mind in this context. Stalin attended seminary for several years but left to join the Marxist Russian Social Democratic Party, and would later go on to promote atheism, kill tens of millions of his own people, imposing a brutal totalitarian regime. From his years at seminary, Stalin would have had a solid understanding of Christ and his message, and I suspect his position in hell is not to be envied.

So, in summary, there are two judgments revealed in Scripture. Believers of all ages will appear at the judgment seat of Christ. They will not be judged for their sins because the blood of Jesus covers their sins. Instead, they will be rewarded like the servants of the parable of the talents according to what they had done in service to God. In contrast, the unbelieving of all ages will appear at the Great White Throne Judgement. Since they did not trust Christ, their sins will not be forgiven. Thus, they will be judged on their own merits, which will be completely inadequate to earn a place in heaven. Consequently, they will be separated from God for all eternity in the lake of fire.

### **Exposition of Sermon Text**

Our sermon text transitions to describe believers' entry into their Father's eternal kingdom. In verse 1 of our sermon text, John says, “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first earth passed away...” John informs us by saying, “Then I saw...” that the new heavens and new earth follow the millennium in sequence. The new heavens and the new earth will replace the first earth, which is our earth because it has passed away. Our present earth and starry heaven have been in decay since the fall. As I mentioned, the universe is running out of energy, and as 2 Peter 3:10 says, “...the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up.” In our text, John is given a vision of the old universe being replaced with a new heaven and earth, which will be magnificent, and there we get glimpses of the grandeur of our eternal home.

Let’s consider the description of the new heaven and earth. First, in contrast with our present earth, of which three-quarters is covered by water, there is no longer any sea on the new earth.

Next, John describes the new Jerusalem, the holy city of God, coming down out of heaven from God. John describes it as a bride adorned for her husband, evoking the sense that

God has taken great care in preparing this beautiful city. In one of the most treasured passages in the NT, Jesus says in John 14:1–3:

1 “Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me.

2 “In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you.

3 “If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also.

Many Bible scholars believe that the place that Jesus prepared for believers of all ages is the beautiful new Jerusalem. I agree with this understanding. This passage is read at many funerals, and we can take great comfort in knowing that believers of all ages will be welcomed into the new Jerusalem when God makes all things new.

Third, the new heaven and earth will be a realization of God’s plan for humanity that the Trinity planned before the creation of the world. God’s plan was always to dwell with His people. Adam and Eve would still be in the garden if they had not sinned, enjoying life in the presence of their Creator. Now, God’s plan will find fulfillment.

In verses 3-4 of our sermon text, John was informed by a loud voice from the throne that the tabernacle of God, which is the dwelling place of God, will be among men. God will dwell with the saved of all ages, faithful men and women of all ages. That is astounding! You and I shall dwell with God forever. John says that God will dwell among us, and we shall be His people. This was what God intended for Adam and Eve in the Garden, but now it will be fully realized, for evil and temptation have been banished and removed to the Lake of Fire. Adam and Eve put us on a detour, but things will have come full circle to God’s intention for the Garden of Eden.

Since Adam and Eve, humans have believed they had a better way than God’s way. Have you ever listened to the words of the song “Woodstock” by Joni Mitchell which Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young popularized? Here is how the song ends:

By the time we got to Woodstock  
We were half a million strong  
And everywhere was a song  
And a celebration

And I dreamed I saw the bomber jet planes  
Riding shotgun in the sky  
Turning into butterflies  
Above our nation

We are stardust, we are golden  
We are caught in the devil's bargain  
And we've got to get ourselves  
Back to the garden

The hippy movement rejected the status quo and embraced peace, drugs, and free love, and shunned war, inequality, and materialism. The world had come out of two terrible world wars, only for the United States to find itself in a new war in Vietnam where thousands were dying. It is easy to understand why young people were disillusioned and disenfranchised. Embedded in the thinking of some young people of the time was a belief that the hippy movement and their communes would usher in a new golden age for humanity.

In Mitchell’s song, bombers turn into butterflies. That line might have been the result of the psychedelic drugs that were popular in the 60s. Saying we are stardust, we are golden, the song implies that humans are better than the societies we have built. There is a sense that this

is true because we are created in the image of God. You could say that Adam and Eve were caught in the devil's bargain because they exchanged a relationship with God for the knowledge of good and evil. Mitchell concludes, "...we've got to get ourselves back to the garden," and as many young people of the time believed, the hippy movement was seemingly the way back to the garden, a new utopia, or at least a better society. However, as Proverbs 14:12 teaches us, "There is a way which seems right to a man, But its end is the way of death."

It was naïve to believe that the hippy movement, with its new sins of recreational drug use and free love, was going to build a better society. The free love led to broken families, skyrocketing divorce rates, and children who are insecure and anxious. The drug use initiated a cycle of drug addiction that continues to this day and has destroyed the lives of millions. You see, humans suffer from a weak view of sin that got us kicked out of the garden and destroyed humanity's fellowship with God. Because sin is in the world and us, we can't fix the evil world we find around us.

Fortunately, the mess we find ourselves in has been fixed for those who believe in Jesus, and it will not be until God ushers in the new heavens and earth that we will be back to the conditions of the Garden of Eden. In fact, it will be better than the garden because all temptation, all unbelief, and all evil will be secluded and cloistered in hell, which will be thrown into the lake of fire, never again to contaminate the kingdom of God.

John continues in verse 3 and 4, revealing the wonderful things we can look forward to. The suffering endured during this life will be replaced by eternal comfort and fellowship in the direct presence of God. The most important aspect of the New Jerusalem is that God will dwell there with His people for all eternity. In the Garden of Eden, God walked with humankind (Genesis 3:8). In ancient Israel, a cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle (Ex 40:34). When Solomon completed and dedicated the temple to the Lord, the glory of the Lord filled it (1 Kings 8:10-11). Later, God took human form and dwelt among us. But in the New Jerusalem, we will experience the permanent presence of God the Father and God the Son for all eternity. We will be in the presence and glory of our Creator, and there will no longer be any tears, death, mourning, crying, or pain because the first things have passed away.

In verses 5 and 6, our final verses for today, we are assured that the one who sits on the throne makes all things new and that his promises are faithful and true. We can count on the promises of God, and we can stake our futures on them because the ones who make them are the Alpha and Omega. Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters, the beginning and end of the Greek alphabet. God and His Son are the beginning and the end of all things, and thus they are sovereign and have dominion over all things. John was referring to God the Father and God the Son, for this title Alpha and Omega applies to both in the Book of Revelation. Those who thirst will drink freely of the water of life, signifying that they will freely partake of the spiritual blessings of God.

#### **Closing:**

Next week, we will consider the wonders of our existence in the New Jerusalem and what we will do in heaven. We will consider the place of angels in heaven and the blessings for the residents of heaven. Let's close with this. I believe that human language is inadequate to describe the place that we will call our eternal home. We get a glimpse of this from the deathbed words of D.L. Moody. D.L. Moody was the great Christian evangelist of the late 1800s. Exhausted from years of ministry and evangelism all around the English-speaking world, Moody was coming to the end of his life in 1899.

Early in the morning of December 22, Moody's son Will was startled by his father's voice from the bed across the room. [Moody said to his son,] "Earth recedes, heaven opens before me!" Will hurried to his father's side [and his

father continued to speak] “This is no dream, Will. It is beautiful....If this is death, it is sweet. God is calling me and I must go. Don't call me back!” A few hours later Moody revived to find his wife and family gathered around him. He said to his wife, “I went to the gate of heaven. Why it is so wonderful, and I saw the children [referring to his daughter and son who had died in childhood].” Within hours, the man who had stirred [the United States and the United Kingdom] for Christ took a few final breaths and then entered the gate of heaven.<sup>i</sup>

Moody's deathbed experience should not be surprising to us, for it is completely in line with Paul's vision of heaven as he writes in 1 Corinthians 2:9, “...Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, And *which* have not entered the heart of man, All that God has prepared for those who love Him.” Dear friends, we need to develop an eternal perspective that will guide us, help us prioritize the things of God, and sustain us through the dark and difficult times that we inevitably face. Our hope in Christ is not in vain. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Ron Rhodes, *The Undiscovered Country*, 70.