

*The Christian faith absolutely presupposes the last judgment and the punishment of the wicked. It is to rescue us from the punishment our sins deserve that the Father sent his Son into the world to suffer and die.*

**“The Reason for it All”**

**Revelation 20:7-15**

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**The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

It is Palm Sunday and I might have interrupted our series in Revelation to take up a text and a subject apropos the Lord’s entry into Jerusalem or his suffering and crucifixion. But it seemed to me that, having reached the final climax of human history at the end of chapter 20, the text we were to take next in Revelation served the purpose of Palm Sunday preaching very well.

**Text Comment**

- v.8 It is worth pointing out the fact that, once the Devil is released and allowed to deceive the nations again, the peoples of the world are again immediately responsive to his seductions. No matter that they have enjoyed the peace and prosperity of the reign of Jesus Christ they are ready to follow the Devil again. It is a demonstration of the fact that human sin goes deeper than the causes of it so often proposed by those who are inclined to provide excuses for mankind. It is not the environment, or poverty, or any other social conditions that make man a rebel against God and a danger to himself and a blight on the life of others. It is something in his very nature: the bent of his heart. He does not want to submit to God and so at the first opportunity he rejoins the rebellion. This will be the final historical proof that God’s judgments are just and well-deserved. [Ladd, 269]
- v.9 Gog and Magog are taken from Ezekiel and from a similar part of the prophecy of Ezekiel; storied names they were for powers and peoples hostile to God and the kingdom of God. It is worth noting that in Ezekiel as here in Revelation the same sequence is found: the messianic kingdom comes to pass in history but proves not to be the end. That period of *shalom* is followed by a final conflict, the destruction of the enemies of God, and then and only then the new and eternal order of life.
- v.10 We’ll have more to say about this shortly, but the lake of fire is obviously a figure of speech. The Devil is a spirit. He is not subject to physical torment. That the lake of fire is a metaphor for the just punishments that will be imposed upon the unbelieving and the impenitent is confirmed later when, in v. 14, we read that death and Hades were also thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire was prepared for the devil, not for men, it is not the end for which God made man, but those men who followed the Devil must share in his fate.
- v.11 In the grandeur of the transcendence of God the natural order disappears.
- v.13 “The book of life” reminds us of God’s gracious election of a people (remember we read earlier of names written in that book before the foundation of the world) and of Christ’s

redemption of them on the cross (this book is elsewhere in Revelation referred to as the *Lamb's Book of Life*). Still the last judgment, as we are taught so often in the Bible with these other books, takes into account the deeds of both unbelievers and believers. How it does so is not here said or explained. An obedient life is, as we know, a demonstration of true faith in Christ and serves to vindicate God's forgiveness of a sinner. But there is also undeniably the teaching in the Bible that in their respective classes both unbelievers and believers will be apportioned a place in the next world commensurate with their obedience and service. Among the unbelievers some will be beaten with few stripes and some with many; among the Christians some will rule over ten cities and some over one.

The point of the mention of the sea, as well as death and Hades, is to underscore the fact that no one will be missed. No one can hide himself from or escape this judgment.

- v.14 This is the moment at which dying, an experience that we know all too well in our world, comes to an end as an experience of human life. The intermediate state – that condition of existence when the soul is separate from the body either in heaven or in hell – that too comes to an end. Everyone is now placed in his or her permanent position.

As there is a second and higher life, so there is a second death. And in the same way that after one finds that higher life there is no more death, so after that second death there is no more life. [Alford, iv, 729] The second death is eternal punishment, the spiritual death that awaits those who have rejected the salvation of God and lived their lives in rebellion against him (21:8). Remember, "death" in the Bible is never extinction, it is never obliteration, it is never the end of existence. It is always rather a condition of existence. When Adam "died" in the Garden in Gen. 3 on account of his sin (remember the Lord had said to Adam that if he ate of the fruit of the Tree that was forbidden to him he would surely die), he did not cease to exist. Paul describes man in sin as "dead" but those dead human beings are still chock-full of existence. In the same way a dead believer in Christ lives even though he has died, and in fact, as Jesus says in John 11, that believer never really dies because his existence has not been extinguished. His soul continues in wakeful, happy consciousness before the Lord and his body rests in the ground awaiting the resurrection. So the *second death* should not be thought of as some form of extinction or of non-existence. Not at all. The second death is that condition of existence in which one is always dying but never able to come to the end; always to be dead but never to be able to die; the person cannot *live* but he or she continues to exist. [Schilder, *Wat is de Hel?* 36, 39]

Why then is this text so appropriate for Palm Sunday? Because it sets before us the presupposition of Christ's suffering and death for sinners. We have here the reason why the Lord came into the world, why he threw the gauntlet down before his enemies by his public entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and so precipitated the events that would lead to his crucifixion. It was to *save* his people from their sins, their misdeeds, and, in particular, from the guilt of those sins; using guilt in the old, strong sense of the term: their liability to be punished for their sins. He came and suffered and died precisely because our sins would be punished in the lake of fire had he not taken upon himself their punishment on the cross. The lake of fire or the cross: those

are the two and only two destinies of human sin; they find their consummation and their effect and their judgment in the one place or the other.

Many times through the ages clever men have attempted to redesign Christianity without the lake of fire – people are attempting to do this again in our own time – but the result is inevitably that the entire edifice crumbles to nothing. If there were no terrible fate to be rescued from, if sin did not pay a wage, if divine wrath did not have to go out against the sin of human beings, why the incarnation of God the Son; why his terrible sacrifice? If there were nothing to save us from why would God have gone to such terrible lengths? This is a question no one has ever answered; nor can it be answered. There is, there can be but one answer: the answer so often and so clearly and so emphatically given in the Bible: Christ came into the world and suffered and died to deliver us from a fate worse than death. The titanic events of the incarnation and crucifixion of the Son of God make sense only in the prospect of the eternal judgment and punishment that sinners must otherwise suffer.

Very often, and especially nowadays and in particular in the comfortable and effete West, people will attempt to evade the force of this inexorable logic by quibbling about the judgment of the wicked. They will list their problems with that doctrine. They fill their minds with the offense they take at the very notion that God should judge the wicked and punish those who rebelled against him. And, to be honest, Christians have sometimes very unwisely encouraged them in their distraction or have given them reasons to quibble instead of facing facts!

In a book popular among English Catholics in the 19<sup>th</sup> century we read this description of hell:

“A little child is in this red-hot oven. Hear how it screams to come out! See how it turns and twists itself about in the fire! It beats its head against the roof of the oven. It stamps its little feet on the floor. You can see on the face of this little child what you see on the faces of all in hell – despair, desperate and horrible.” [Cited in Bloesch, *The Last Things*, 296]

That is horrible! It brings reproach on the justice of God. There is nothing like this in the Bible. The figures of speech used to describe the judgments of the Lord should never be taken literally. Any thoughtful reader of the Bible knows that. What is more, there are many positive statements about the judgment in Holy Scripture that describe it for what it is: perfect justice, nothing more, nothing less. No one will be punished more than he deserves and no one less. Some will be beaten with few stripes, some with many. Dante, in his *Divine Comedy*, comes nearer to the biblical picture in his imaginative account of the descending circles of hell in which each sort of sinner received “measure for measure.” The punishment was exactly designed to fit the crime, just as virtually all human beings think it ought to be.

The fact of the matter is that I don’t really take with full seriousness people’s quibbles about the last judgment and eternal punishment. I do not deny that there are questions that force themselves upon the mind. Surely there are. But those questions seem very different, of another kind altogether, when what everyone knows to be the truth is first admitted. The fact is, those who complain of the last judgment firmly *believe* in judgment. They too feel that those who do wrong ought to suffer the consequences. They may deny that *they* are wrong doers, but they have

no doubt about the wrongdoing of others and the rightness of judgment. Our entire view of the world is based on this conviction. Every human being in the world, even the most notorious criminal, still believes in the justice of punishment. He may excuse his own behavior, but he believes the bad behavior of others ought to be punished. Hitler, at the very end of his days, was meting out punishments to erstwhile cronies who had in some way betrayed him! Indeed, this conviction is so universal, is so indelibly inscribed on the human soul that to deny the last judgment is, in fact, to deny a conviction and a principle so fundamental and so precious to human life that it is impossible to imagine human life without it.

Can you possibly imagine a situation in which it makes no final difference whether one lives as Hitler did or Mother Theresa? Even to consider the possibility is to flirt with the deepest despair. You will hear the confident atheists of our day assert that it is possible to justify human morality without recourse to God or to the last judgment, but the fact is in all the thousands of years of human thought and history no one has done it yet. Not for those ages past has anyone justified morality without God and the judgment. If the wicked get away with their wickedness; if the righteous get nothing for their righteousness, *what is* wickedness and *what is* righteousness? They are words only; not real things. And no one, not one single human being in the history of human life, has ever really believed that! No, the fact is, the view that everyone has of good and evil, or right and wrong, of worthiness and unworthiness cannot stand without a last judgment. So, I don't take as seriously as some do the quibbles that people raise about the Bible's doctrine of the lake of fire. To deny the lake of fire is to deny the human conscience; to deny the lake of fire is to deny the universal human experience of remorse for bad behavior; to deny the lake of fire is to deny the sense of shame that all of us have when we have behaved badly; and to deny the lake of fire is to deny the pleasure, the pride, and the satisfaction we rightfully take in honesty, bravery, selflessness, purity, and love. We *know* there is a moral order. We know it as certainly as we know that we exist. It is essential to our outlook as human beings. We cannot escape it no matter how hard we try. And because we cannot, we should not try to. Indeed, I can put it this way: anyone who denies the last judgment and the lake of fire ought to mourn doing so. He ought bitterly to regret the fact that he cannot believe in reward and punishment in the world to come; because to deny this is to despair of real meaning, real goodness, real justice, and real truth in this life. Without the lake of fire life in this world becomes...nothing of any lasting importance at all.

John Henry Newman wrote long years ago: "Hell is the turning point between Christianity and [paganism], it is the critical doctrine – you can't get rid of it – it's the very characteristic of Christianity. We must therefore look matters in the face. Is it more improbable that eternal punishment should be true, or that there should be no God? For if there be a God there is eternal punishment..." [*Apologia Pro Vita Sua*] That is surely right. The atheist will then say, but there is no God. There is no eternal punishment and there is no God.

But what that same atheist will rarely go on to say is that, because there is no God and no eternal punishment, there is also no such thing as right or wrong, good or evil or hatred or love. He cannot say it because he does not believe it and because he knows that those who listen to him don't believe it either. But if there is no last judgment, if there is no lake of fire, there is no right and wrong, good or evil. These realities upon which we have built our lives and according to which we are constantly judging ourselves and others, these realities that amount to that which is

most precious in all of human life and experience, without the lake of fire are at the last mere words, terms we use to describe the pathetic illusions we live by. Let our modern atheist stand up and say that it does not matter and cannot be shown to matter whether you treat others as Hitler did or as Mother Theresa did. Let him say that the burglar and the one he robs, the murderer and the one he kills, the rapist and the one he violates are all the same morally speaking, for morality is not a real thing, but merely an illusion. Let him explain, if he can – for no one has been able to do it yet – why through the few years we have to live in this world we should not simply serve ourselves if there is no lake of fire; why we should not eat, drink, and be merry without regard to others if there is no last judgment.

What is more, what is there about this world of ours that would lead anyone to think that there would not be a judgment and that punishment would not be imposed upon those who deserve it? The problem of hell, the problem of the lake of fire, is not a problem of the future only. It is already with us. How much of life never reaches its potential. How much suffering already exists in this world. How much punishment can we already see being visited upon the life of men and women, boys and girls. This is God's world. It is a world of reward and a world of judgment. Everywhere we look it is so. The prison door clangs shut upon the convicted felon; shame blights the life of someone whose deeds are exposed; the tidy existence of a person crumbles when he or she is found out in their sins and misdeeds. We see this but hardly ever reckon with what it portends. Just as everything wonderful we can imagine of heaven is an extrapolation from the beauty and goodness and love and joy of life as it is experienced on this earth, so our understanding of hell is simply the development to a perfect and complete measure what we know of crime and punishment here in this world. What is imperfect here will be perfect there, whether in the world of everlasting joy or the world of shame and penalty.

You can tell how superficial so much of the denial of the lake of fire actually is by how little any of the advocates of this so-called broader or higher or happier view take at all seriously the world as we know it and the suffering and punishment that is so characteristic of this world. There is something genuinely devilish in this dishonesty, this deceiving and being deceived. The world rings with judgment! Every day we are reminded a thousand times over that sin pays a wage.

Long years ago, James Denny, the Scottish theologian wrote of what was then called the “new theology,” by which was meant a form of Christianity shorn of its iron, Christianity without the last judgment or punishment in the world to come.

“What astonishes me much is how people with Bibles in their hands, and the great way of psalmists, prophets, and apostles in thinking of these things before their eyes, can stand the puerility and the moral offensiveness of much of [this] new theology. I have a great faith that the Bible way of looking at everything human and divine will win in the long run because it is the *big* way; and all uncorrupted minds succumb to that eventually.”  
[*Letters*, 86]

That is very well put, I think. The Bible's way is the *big* way. It takes account of all the facts, including the dark facts, of which there are so many. It takes up into its account of the world and the future of mankind the realities that we all know both of sin and sin's forgiveness, of punishment and of escape from punishment. It never trivializes these things; it never skips over

them to hurry on to something happier and more pleasant. It looks brutish human life in the eye and declares it under the judgment of God. But it also appeals to the longings of the human heart for love, peace, and joy and tells us that those longings are likewise a witness to reality. That there is such a place and such a world where joy rests on everyone's head.

The sinfulness and guilt of man is such and the holiness of God is such that the overcoming of sin and the liberation of man from his guilt could never have been easily achieved. It would require an utterly unprecedented intervention on God's part. But *that* intervention, that visitation of the world by its Maker, his living incognito, his humiliation at the hands of his own creatures, and his terrible suffering and death as punishment for our sins is the great story of the Bible – precisely because salvation from sin and judgment required nothing less.

This is in truth the *big* way. What is the Bible's view of the human story? The entire world is shut up to judgment because of its sins, sins that have so terribly blighted the life of human beings and of this world. There must be a judgment; there must be punishment because moral order and true goodness demand it, a moral order and goodness that is rooted in and only adequately explained by the nature of the God who made the world. But God in his love intervened to offer rescue to those who would avail themselves of his forgiveness. The high tragedy of life derives from the absolute necessity of a reckoning with sin.

We know all too well what scoundrels we are: selfish, petty, unkind, ungenerous; how often our lives are a pale shadow of what we know full well they were meant to be. This world is a sad place and the largest part of that sadness is the direct consequence of what human beings say and do and do not say and do not do. There is so much selfishness in human life; selfishness right down to the bottom. Alexander Whyte was right to say that the word self is simply a synonym for sin. We do not live for God and we do not live for others. We know to do those things that are good and right but we rarely do them very well and usually not at all. When in honesty we compare our actual lives to what we know very well they ought to be; when we compare our thoughts – the thoughts that no one else sees or knows – with what we hope others will think of us; when we imagine taking out of our lives everything that is selfish and small and unworthy and putting into our lives everything our conscious acknowledges is genuinely good – out with the anger and in with the patience; out with the lie and in with the truth; out with the impurity and in with self-control; out with self and in with self-sacrifice and the love of others; out with indifference toward God and in with reverence and gratitude toward him who gave us life – would we even recognize ourselves? That is the *big* truth about human beings.

And the Bible faces that truth squarely. Don't tell God who looks upon the heart and who knows everything about our lives – what we do and what we fail to do – I say, don't tell God that there is nothing to judge and nothing to punish.

But I will tell you something else. When a Father loves his child, when he sees his child whom he loves in great need and suffering terribly, he would do, he *will* do anything, absolutely anything to help. You will appreciate that I have a present sense of this, of the way a Father's love goes out to his child and how he feels in such a time that he would do, he would suffer anything to prevent his child's sadness and loss. My daughter lost her twin babies yesterday; they were born alive but too young and did not survive. Her heart is broken. The father feels the

heartbreak of her woe; it is his own as it is hers. He finds in himself a ready willingness to say, "Lord take me, let me suffer the loss if only she might be spared." There is a great power in such love. But in human love there is a great impotence as well. One cannot rescue; one cannot save; one cannot prevent that terrible loss.

But God has no such limitations. His Father's heart of love is joined to almighty power. He can prevent and he can forestall what must otherwise come to pass. And *that* is the great reality of this life and this world, this is what has happened. The Father's great love could not bear, could not bear to see his children in the lake of fire. And so he contrived to deliver them from it, no matter that the only way to do so absolutely required the loss of an infinitely beloved son.

God is eternal. He sees the lake of fire. It is present to him. He knows all about it. He sees the punishment of the impenitent and the rebellious. And he sees his children, piling up that judgment for themselves, making for themselves a place in the lake of fire, a judgment they are largely oblivious to but that awaits them nonetheless. And he *cannot bear* to think of them, his dear ones, in the lake of fire. *He could not bear the thought!* And so he literally moved heaven and earth to rescue them. He sent his son to humiliation and death so that their sins would not be punished in the lake of fire, but in a Father's broken heart and a Son's broken body.

That then is the connection between Palm Sunday and Good Friday on the one hand and the lake of fire on the other. A great and mighty love contrived the first to ensure that we would not suffer the second. The Father bore a great sorrow because he could not bear to see us suffer the just judgment of our sins; the Son was cast into the lake of fire so that we would never be. One son was damned, was sent to be damned and went willingly to damnation, so that a great company of sons and daughters, delivered from the second death, would rise to live, *live as we are meant to live*, to love him and to be loved by him forever.