

Unwrapping God's Judgment

Rev 19:11-20:15

Talent shows have made a comeback on our TVs over the last 12 years or so, and the clip we just saw is perhaps one of the best known moments of this talent show revival. In 2009 Susan Boyle walked out onto the stage of *Britain's Got Talent* and you can tell by the judge's expressions and by the audience's expressions that they weren't expecting much. At first glance they saw a woman in her late 40s without all the excessive grooming we normally associate with showbusiness. We know what they are thinking, don't we? "We're going to have to suffer through this!" Perhaps they thought that it might be an opportunity to laugh; that Susan Boyle's attempt at singing might be sadly funny.

But then the Susan Boyle opened her mouth, and those first impressions fell away. "You weren't expecting that, were you" says one host to the camera! And instead of booing or laughing the audience stands and applauds. The first judge we heard from in that clip, Simon Cowell, he actually signed Susan Boyle to his record label after this appearance and her first album sold over 10 million copies. A great moment in recent TV history.

And in a way—and I appreciate this might be an unusual analogy—but watching Susan Boyle sing is a little like reading the book of Revelation. This week we are addressing that part of the book which speaks about God's judgment. And when a preacher announces his or her topic as the judgment of God, I know that internally many of us will be rolling our eyes, thinking "Well, this is something that we are going to have to suffer through!" I know you think that way because I've felt that way myself. In fact the only sermon I have ever walked out of was a sermon about God's judgment upon sin. I was a university student at the time, attending a lunchtime Bible talk on the book of Isaiah—a book heavy with passages about God's punishment of evil-doers—and I thought "Not today. I can't hear this today". And so I walked out. To my detriment, actually, now that I look back on it; God's word is a word of blessing no matter what the topic. But sometimes we can prejudge a topic and miss out on the blessing. Imagine if Simon Cowell had dismissed Susan Boyle before letting her sing. She ended up being a great blessing to him and to his wallet, and so it is with the Bible's teaching about the great, final judgment from God. If we dismiss it, we'll miss out on a great blessing and we'll miss some wonderful news.

We know it's wonderful news because it's news that people stand up and applaud. Our Bible readings began at Revelation 19:11, but if you quickly look at the first half of Chapter 19 you see that the event of God's judgment brings forth rapturous praise from his people. After this I heard what sounded like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting: "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are his judgments. What is it that we are missing, that we don't feel the same sense of jubilation over God's judgment? How is it that a wonderful song can emerge from what we see in front of us?

Well, let's have a closer look at the passages that have been read out for us today, beginning with 19:11. I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and wages war. And John continues to describe this rider with images that we have become accustomed to in the book of Revelation: eyes like fire, a sharp sword coming out of the mouth, and to clear up any misconception we see a name printed on robe: "King of kings and Lord of Lords". This rider is the Lord Jesus himself.

But is the way he is presented here is the way we usually think about him? How do you usually think about Jesus? Meek and mild? The humble servant leader whose interest is in the weak and vulnerable? The wise teacher who offers philosophy but doesn't force it upon us? The always gentle Jesus who accepts all without judgment.

If you think about Jesus in that way then you would be right. Jesus did come to serve, Jesus was gentle, Jesus accepted all sorts of different people, but if that's as far as you go then you haven't got the full picture. When Jesus first came among us he came to serve, but when he returns he will come to rule with a sword. You see glimpses of this the first time around, when Jesus showed his anger against the corrupt religious officials of his day, and it's on his return that his authority will be given its full expression.

Why is his return in this way something worth singing about? The key is back in verse 11, the war he wages will be all about bringing justice: with Justice he judges and wages war. This is what the great multitude celebrate in the beginning of the chapter, For just and true are his judgments they sing. Justice is something that everyone wants to see done. When we are listening to the radio and we hear that a judge has let off a serious offender with a light sentence we get angry, we think "That's not right!" When we hear that vulnerable people are being mistreated or taken advantage of by those in power we think "Something should be done about that!". We love justice, and this is what the return of Jesus will bring about.

Jesus is coming for the bad guys, and they ought to be very afraid. The emphasis in the second half of Ch 19 is on God's judgment of leaders, and v17 paints a picture that ought to shake any powerful figure to the core. And I saw an angel standing in the sun, who cried in a loud voice to all the birds flying in midair, "Come, gather together for the great supper of God, ¹⁸so that you may eat the flesh of kings, generals, and the mighty, of horses and their riders and the flesh of all people, free and slave, great and small. Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to wage war against the rider on the horse and his army.

The beast first made his appearance in Chapter 13, and he represents those governments and people in authority who are actively fighting against God and his people. Note they're gathered together to wage war against the rider on the horse and his army. These are figures of authority who are doing the work of Satan, who are persecuting God's people. But note also that when the day of judgment comes, the fight is over very quickly, In verse 20 we are simply told But the beast was captured. When Jesus returns there will be no drawn out battle, rather justice will be swift and it will be

devastating. Together with one of his collaborators the beast is thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur. It's a frightening scene, but it is a scene where God shows that he cares about justice. He cares about the cruelties that the powerful inflict on the weak, it shows that he cares about his church, and that he will not forget the persecution that she has had to endure.

The other week I read that the regime in North Korea has just executed a large number of Christians. Often these executions are carried out in stadiums like the Romans used to do. God won't forget these atrocities; that regime will be brought to justice. And they're not the only ones of course. The blasphemy laws in Pakistan have caused suffering for God's people, as has sharia law in other parts of the world. God isn't indifferent to all this, he isn't indifferent to the suffering you have endured because of your faith. He just asks us to wait until the day when Christ returns because that's when justice will be delivered.

And the justice will extend right to the very cause of all this suffering. In Chapter 20 And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. ² He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. Chapter 20 explains how Satan will meet his end, but the way it's explained has caused a lot of division amongst Christians. The division is about how to understand the 1000 years that John mentions. Some people read this passage as describing a literal 1000 year period where Satan will be bound and when God's people will reign. But I'm more inclined to see the 1000 years as a symbolic number. Remember, the book of Revelation is a book rich in symbolism, so it does seem a little strange to get to chapter 20 and suddenly ditch the symbolism in order to start reading the 1000 years as a literal figure. I think the 1000 years simply means 'a very long time' and is probably best understood as the period of time between Christ's first ministry and his future return. During that time Satan is active, but he is bound. He is bound by the ministry of the church: the announcement that Jesus is victorious and has purified us from all sin. It's when people believe that message that Satan loses his power.

And then after this age comes to an end, Satan will meet the same fate as the beast. In verse 8 Satan is pictured gathering an army. He gathers them by method of deceit, fooling them into thinking that Jesus is worth fighting against, that Jesus can in fact be beaten. And he fools a lot of people. Jesus has a lot of enemies, in number they are like the sand on the seashore we're told in verse 8. Verse 9 They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves. Again, make no mistake, as God's people there are people who are against us. Satan is marshaling as much of the world against us as he can manage. The problem for him is that the church is a group that God loves. It's an interesting description to drop in there: the camp of God's people, the city he loves. Sometimes people ask the question "How can a loving God be a judging God?" Well, here's an interesting way of looking at it, I think. God's judgment is in fact motivated by love, by his love for his people and his desire to see their suffering avenged. As with the beast before him, the battle between Satan and Jesus is a non-event. After he has lined up his followers against the church we are simply

told in the second half of verse 9 But fire came down from heaven and devoured them.¹⁰ And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

So while the idea of God's future judgment might first of all repulse us, its description in the book of Revelation has some surprising notes. It demonstrates that God cares: He cares about justice, he cares about us. God judges because he is a loving God who seeks to defend his people. I'm not sure I'd want to follow a God who claims to love me but turns a blind eye to those who would seek to tear me down. What advice would you give your daughter if she was out with her boyfriend and found that he ran away when someone mugged them at knifepoint? Yeah, he's a guy worth keeping! God's judgment shows that he's loyal to the people he loves, and for that reason we ought not be embarrassed about it.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of this teaching is found in verses 11-15. We've seen the great and mighty brought to account, but it would be a mistake to think that judgment is just for the powerful. In verse 12 John sees the dead, 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. While these chapters focus on those who orchestrate evil at the highest level, it is also a fact that both the great *and small* will have their lives examined. We heard this earlier in 19.18. The angel calls on the birds of the air to feast on the flesh of all people, free and slave, great and small. The certainty of this experience is highlighted by 20.11, the earth and heavens might flee from Christ's presence, but we are left standing there waiting to hear God's verdict about us.

What will this verdict be based upon? John describes some books that are there in the heavenly courtroom, and in these books will be a record of every action that we have ever done! You probably have an idea of what's written there already. You probably know that there are a couple of things, perhaps more, that God isn't pleased about. But notes have been made, and those notes will be recalled, even notes about things which we've forgotten. Can you remember everything you've ever done? We'll you don't have to remember because it's all been written down.

If we're honest we'll admit that this isn't great news. Psalm 15.1 asks the question LORD, who may dwell in your sacred tent? Who may live on your holy mountain? The answer in the Psalm is The one whose walk is blameless. Blameless! No-one has blamelessly followed God all their lives, and when God's standard is blamelessness, —when God's standard is perfection— then these books will become our undoing! What can be done about it?

Well, notice that in this scene there is another book, unlike the others this one has a name, its called *the Book of Life*. That's sounds promising, doesn't it? And in v15 we see that the book of life cancels out the other books Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire. You see those deeds of ours that are written down and recorded in heaven, those deeds will only lead to one result:

us being thrown into the lake of fire. But if our names are written into the book of life, then judgment will lead us to a different outcome all together. The book of life is the passport to the age to come, a passport which unfolds in glorious splendor in the following two chapters, but first of all our names have to get written in that book!

So how does that happen? Well, if you go back to ch 19.6-9, we have, amid the scenes of judgment, a small scene of a wedding. It's interesting, isn't it, both a court case and a wedding are very public events, but one is infinitely more joyous than that other. And the return of Jesus will not only be a day of judgment but it will also be a great festival, where Jesus, the Lamb of God, is joined to his church as a groom to his bride.

And latter on in ch 21.27, the book of life is referred to as the Lamb's book of life. Who else would be in the book but those who are joined to Jesus, those who have trusted in Christ's death as the Lamb of God, those who are relying on Christ's sacrificial death to wash away their sins? The way to have your name written in that book is to turn to Jesus. If you trust him, you will be linked to him, and as the Lamb of God he will ensure your name is written in the right book. Back in chapter 7 we were told: those who survive the great tribulation will be those who've washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. While our deeds send us to hell, it's Christ's blood that leads us to heaven.

Place your faith in Jesus' death, that's how your name gets on the list.

And friends, today is a great day to have your name put down. If you are sitting here today and you know that this is true, you know that as it stands your record of deeds will send you to hell, then today is a day you can turn to Christ and get into that book of life! What a relief that would be! No use putting it off or forgetting about it, because the day is coming when both great and small will stand before the throne of God. But no matter who you are, one entry in the book of life is all you need, and Christ will write you name if only you come to him.

I will pray for him to do this right now. You can join me in the quietness of your own mind and heart, and you can say *Amen* with me at the end to make this prayer your own.

Father in Heaven, We have heard today about the time which is coming, a time when you will demonstrate your care and love by judging those who would seek to destroy your people. And we have also heard that no-one will escape your judgment, and that all our deeds will be laid bare. We know that this is bad news for us. But we have also heard of this book of Life! What a great hope that is, that we might find our names written in this other book! And so we place our trust in Jesus, who by his work as the Lamb of God, gave up his life to wash away our sins, so that our evil deeds might not stand against us anymore. We ask that his death might be for us, and that we might have our own names written in his book of life. In his name we pray, Amen.