

Revelation # 42

Man's Last Day in God's Court (Revelation 20:11–15)

I. Introduction

- a. Read
- b. This passage describes the final sentencing of the lost and is the most serious, sobering, and tragic passage in the entire Bible.
- c. Commonly known as the Great White Throne judgment, it is the last courtroom scene that will ever take place.
- d. After this there will never again be a trial, and God will never again need to act as judge.
- e. The accused, all the unsaved who have ever lived, will be resurrected to experience a trial like no other that has ever been.
 - i. There will be no debate over their guilt or innocence.
 - ii. There will be a prosecutor, but no defender; an accuser, but no advocate.
 - iii. There will be an indictment, but no defense mounted by the accused; the convicting evidence will be presented with no rebuttal or cross-examination.
 - iv. There will be an utterly unsympathetic Judge and no jury, and there will be no appeal of the sentence He pronounces.

- v. The guilty will be punished eternally with no possibility of parole in a prison from which there is no escape.
 - f. The language of this passage is plain, stark, and unembellished.
 - i. Few details are given, and the description is utterly lacking in the vivid, eloquent modifiers that might be expected.
 - ii. But the scene is frightening enough in its own right that such language would be superfluous.
 - iii. The beloved apostle John, recording this vision in a cave or on a hillside on the island of Patmos, no doubt was shaken as he wrote of the eternal damnation of the wicked.
 - g. This simple, but powerful text describes the terrifying reality of the final verdict and sentence on sinners under four headings: the scene, the summons, the standard, and the sentence.
- II. The Scene.
- a. Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, (20:11–12a)
 - b. In one brief, straightforward, unembellished statement, John describes the appalling, terrifying scene before him.
 - c. The apostle is shown the Judge seated on His throne of judgment, and all the accused standing before Him.

- d. This vision of the Great White Throne judgment follows those of the Millennium (20:1–10), and the Second Coming (19:11–21), and immediately precedes that of the new heaven and the new earth.
- e. The first thing John **saw** was **a great white throne**.
 - i. Nearly fifty times in Revelation there is the mention of a throne.
 - ii. In this case it is the seat of God’s sovereign rule (cf. 4:2–6, 9; 5:1–7, 13; 6:16; 7:10, 15; 19:4; 21:5).
 - iii. It is called **great** not only because of its size as greater than the thrones mentioned in 20:4, but also because of its significance, majesty, and authority.
 - iv. That it is **white** symbolizes its purity, holiness, and justice.
 - v. The verdict handed down from this **throne** will be absolutely equitable, righteous, and just. “The Lord abides forever,” wrote David, “He has established His throne for judgment, and He will judge the world in righteousness; He will execute judgment for the peoples with equity” (Ps. 9:7–8).
 - vi. Jesus described this scene as the “resurrection of judgment” (John 5:29).
 - vii. Of this judgment, the apostle Paul wrote, “Because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the

day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God” (Rom. 2:5).

- f. Even more awe inspiring than the **throne** was the vision of **Him who sat upon it**.
 - i. The judge on the throne is none other than the eternal, almighty God, described in the throne scene of 4:8–11(read)
 - ii. Earlier in Revelation the Tribulation martyrs cried out, “Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb” (7:10).
 - iii. In 19:4 “The twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who sits on the throne saying, ‘Amen. Hallelujah!’ ” (cf. 1:4; 4: 9–10; 5:6–7, 13; 6:16).
 - iv. Sharing the throne with the Father is the Lord Jesus Christ.
 - v. In 3:21 Jesus promised, “He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.”
 - vi. In John’s vision of the new heaven and the new earth, he saw “the throne of God and of the Lamb” (22:1, 3).
- g. Though the Father and the Son share the throne, it is the Son who is uniquely in view here, since Scripture teaches that He will judge sinners.
 - i. In John 5:22 Jesus said, “Not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son,” while in verses 26–27 He added, “Just

as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself; and He gave Him authority to execute judgment, because He is the Son of Man.”

- ii. In Acts 10:42 Peter declared that Jesus “is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead.”
 - iii. It is God in the Person of the glorified Lord Jesus Christ who will sit in final judgment on unbelievers.
- h. After describing the vision of the Judge on His throne, John noted the startling reality that **from His presence earth and heaven fled away.**
- i. That amazing, incredible statement describes the “uncreation” of the universe.
 - ii. The earth will have been reshaped by the devastating judgments of the Tribulation and restored during the millennial kingdom.
 - iii. Yet it will still be tainted with sin and subject to the effects of the Fall—decay and death; hence it must be destroyed, since nothing corrupted by sin will be permitted to exist in the eternal state (2 Pet. 3:13).
 - iv. God will in its place create “a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away” (21:1; cf. 21:5; Isa. 65:17, 22; 2 Pet. 3:13).

- v. The present **earth and heaven** will not merely be moved or reshaped, since John saw in his vision that **no place was found for them**.
- vi. They will be uncreated and go totally out of existence.
 - i. This is nothing less than the sudden, violent termination of the universe (cf. Ps. 102:25–26; Isa. 51:6; Matt. 5:18; 24:35; Luke 16:17; 21:33; Heb. 1:11–12; 12:26–27).
 - j. Barnhouse wrote, “There is to be an end of the material heavens and earth which we know. It is not that they are to be purified and rehabilitated, but that the reverse of creation is to take place. They are to be uncreated. As they came from nothing at the word of God, they are to be sucked back into nothingness by this same word of God” (*Revelation: An Expository Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971], 391).
 - k. The details of God’s uncreation of the universe are given by Peter in 2 Peter 3:10–13, which describes the final expression of the Day of the Lord: But 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. Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! But

according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells.

1. The Day of the Lord will come suddenly, unexpectedly, and with disastrous consequences for the unprepared—just like the coming of a thief.
- m. When that Day comes, several things will happen.
 - i. First, “the heavens will pass away with a roar.”
 1. It describes the loud whistling, crackling, rushing sound that will result when “the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up ... [when] the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat.”
 2. *Stoicheion* (“elements”) refers to the basic building blocks of matter, such as atomic and subatomic particles.
 3. “Destroyed” is from the verb *luō*, and could be translated “dissolved.”
 4. The present universe will explode like a gigantic nuclear bomb, and the resulting “intense heat” will literally dissolve all the matter in it.
 5. The present laws of thermodynamics, which state that matter can neither be created nor destroyed, will no longer be in effect.

6. As a result, the universe “will be burned up”; it will be totally consumed.
 7. The absolute reverse of creation will occur. It didn’t take eons of evolution to create the universe, nor will it take eons to uncreate it.
 8. The uncreation of the universe, like its creation, will take place by the word of God.
- n. Introducing the final element in this fearful scene, John writes that he **saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne.**
- i. The setting is the indescribable void, the inconceivable nothingness between the end of the present universe and the creation of the new heaven and the new earth.
 - ii. The prisoners before the bar are all physically **dead**, since there are no longer any living people—none could possibly have survived the destruction of the present universe.
 - iii. The last living unbelievers will perish when God crushes the rebellion at the end of the Millennium (20:8–9).
 - iv. The last living believers will be translated and transformed into their eternal bodies, like Enoch (Gen. 5:24), Elijah (2 Kings 2:11), and the raptured church (1 Thess. 4:13–18).
- o. The **dead** pictured here **standing before the throne** of divine judgment are not just from the millennial rebellion, but include all the unbelievers who ever lived.

- p. This is the “resurrection of judgment” (John 5:29), the resurrection “to disgrace and everlasting contempt” (Dan. 12:2), the “resurrection of ... the wicked” (Acts 24:15).
- q. The Bible teaches that no believer will ever face God’s judgment, because “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1).
- r. Everyone “who believes in Him is not judged” (John 3:18); they have “eternal life, and [do] not come into judgment, but [have] passed out of death into life” (John 5:24).
- s. Far from being judged, all the godly participants in the first resurrection (20:6) will have already received their rewards (cf. v. 4; 19:7–9; 1 Cor. 3:12–15; 2 Cor. 5:10).
- t. To emphasize the all-encompassing scope of the judgment, John notes that the sweeping mass of unbelievers before God’s throne includes both **the great and the small**.
 - i. All will face judgment, the somebodies and the nobodies, “for there is no partiality with God” (Rom. 2:11; cf. Deut. 10:17; Job 34:19; Eph. 6:9; Col. 3:25; 1 Pet. 1:17).
 - ii. John Phillips provocatively wrote: There is a terrible fellowship there.... The dead, small and great, stand before God. Dead souls are united to dead bodies in a fellowship of horror and despair. Little men and paltry women whose lives were

filled with pettiness, selfishness, and nasty little sins will be there. Those whose lives amounted to nothing will be there, whose very sins were drab and dowdy, mean, spiteful, peevish, groveling, vulgar, common, and cheap. The great will be there, men who sinned with a high hand, with dash, and courage and flair. Men like Alexander and Napoleon, Hitler and Stalin will be present, men who went in for wickedness on a grand scale with the world for their stage and who died unrepentant at last. Now one and all are arraigned and on their way to be damned: a horrible fellowship congregated together for the first and last time. (*Exploring Revelation*, rev. ed. [Chicago: Moody, 1987; reprint, Neptune, N.J.: Loizeaux, 1991], 242–43)

III. The Summons.

- a. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; (20:13a)
- b. As the next scene in this ultimate courtroom drama unfolds, the prisoners are summoned from their cells to appear before the Judge.
- c. Since their deaths, their souls have been tormented in a place of punishment; now the time has come for them to be sentenced to the final, eternal hell.
- d. Before **the sea** was uncreated and went out of existence (cf. 21:1), it **gave up the dead which were in it.**

- e. The **sea** may be singled out because it is seemingly the most difficult place from which bodies could be resurrected.
 - i. But God will summon from its depths new bodies for all who perished in the **sea** throughout human history, including those who drowned in the Flood, those who went down with the *Titanic*, the *Lusitania*, the *Arizona*, and the countless other ships that have sunk, as well as all the millions of other people who met their end at **sea**.
- f. **Death** symbolizes all the places on land from which God will resurrect new bodies for the unrighteous dead.
- g. The **sea** and **death** are pictured as insatiable monsters that have swallowed those bodies and will be forced to disgorge them before their uncreation.
- h. **Hades** is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word *sheol*. Both words describe the realm of the dead.
 - i. *Sheol*, used sixty-seven times in the Old Testament, describes the realm of the dead in general.
 - ii. **Hades** is used ten times in the New Testament, always in reference to the place of punishment (cf. Luke 16:23) where the unrighteous dead are kept pending their sentencing to hell.
 - iii. In this incredible scene, **Hades** is emptied of its captive spirits, who are reunited with resurrection bodies before the bar of God's justice.

- iv. Unbelievers, fitted with resurrection bodies suited for hell, will then be ready for their sentencing to the lake of fire where their punishment, unlike that in **Hades**, will last forever.

IV. The Standard.

- a. and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds.... and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. (20:12*b*, 13*b*)
- b. As the judgment commences, the Judge opens the **books**. The scene is reminiscent of the one described by Daniel (Dan. 7:9–10)
- c. The **books** contain the record of every thought, word, and deed of every unsaved person who ever lived.
- d. God has kept perfect, accurate, and comprehensive records of every person's life, **and the dead** will be **judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds.**
- e. Sinners' **deeds** will be measured against God's perfect, holy standard, which Jesus defined in Matthew 5:48: "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."
 - i. No prisoner before the bar of divine justice will be able to claim the perfect obedience to God's holy standards that He requires.

- ii. They “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23), and are “dead in [their] trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1).
- f. God’s justice demands payment for every person’s sins. Christ paid that penalty for believers:
 - i. “He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him” (Isa. 53:5–6).
 - ii. “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’ ” (Gal. 3:13).
 - iii. God “made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21).
 - iv. “[Christ] Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness” (1 Pet. 2:24).
- g. But unbelievers, not having Christ’s righteousness imputed to them (Phil. 3:9), will themselves pay the penalty for violating God’s law—eternal destruction in hell (2 Thess. 1:9).
- h. God’s judgment of unrepentant, unbelieving sinners’ evil **deeds** will include their thoughts.

- i. “God ... knows the secrets of the heart” (Ps. 44:21), and He “will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus” (Rom. 2:16), “For nothing is hidden that will not become evident, nor anything secret that will not be known and come to light” (Luke 8:17).
- i. Sinners will also be judged for their words.
 - i. Jesus said in Matthew 12:37, “For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”
- j. Finally, unbelievers will be judged for their actions:
 - i. “God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil” (Eccl. 12:14);
 - ii. “The Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and will then repay every man according to his deeds” (Matt. 16:27).
- k. Nor will anyone be able to claim ignorance of God’s standards, because both creation (Rom. 1:20) and the conscience (Rom. 2:14–15) reveal God’s righteousness.
 - i. Those without knowledge of God’s law will be judged on the basis of the knowledge they did have (Rom. 2:12).
- l. The absolute, unerring accuracy of God’s judgment will ensure that unbelievers’ punishment in hell fits their iniquity.

- i. Each person's life will be individually evaluated, and each person's punishment will be consistent with that evaluation.
- ii. Thus, Scripture teaches that there will be varying degrees of punishment in hell.
- iii. When He sent the twelve out on a preaching tour Jesus told them, "Whoever does not receive you, nor heed your words, as you go out of that house or that city, shake the dust off your feet. Truly I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city" (Matt. 10:14–15).
- iv. Rebuking several cities for their unbelief, Jesus declared: "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. Nevertheless I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You will descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day. Nevertheless I say to you that it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for you." (Matt. 11:21–24)
- v. The hypocritical scribes "who like to walk around in long robes, and like respectful

greetings in the market places, and chief seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets, who devour widows' houses, and for appearance's sake offer long prayers; these will receive greater condemnation" (Mark 12:38–40).

- vi. Describing the final judgment in the parable of the faithful steward, Jesus taught that "[the] slave who knew his master's will and did not get ready or act in accord with his will, will receive many lashes, but the one who did not know it, and committed deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few" (Luke 12:47–48).
- vii. The writer of Hebrews asks, "How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?" (Heb. 10:29).
- m. It should be noted that while there are varying degrees of punishment in hell, everyone there will suffer intolerable, indescribable misery and torment.
 - i. All sinners in hell will be utterly separated from God and all that comes from His goodness.
 - ii. Thus, they will be miserable, but not equally miserable.
- n. After the **books** containing the prisoners' evil **deeds** were opened, **another book was opened, which is the book of life.**

- i. This book's imagery corresponds to the registry of citizens kept by ancient cities; it contains the names of all those whose "citizenship is in heaven" (Phil. 3:20).
 - ii. It is referred to several times in Revelation (v. 15; 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 21:27).
 - iii. The **book of life** is the record of God's elect (cf. Dan. 12:1; Mal. 3:16; Luke 10:20; Phil. 4:3; Heb. 12:23), and all whose names are not recorded in it will be eternally damned.
 - iv. Since their names were not in the **book of life**, the prisoners before the Great White Throne **were judged, every one of them according to their deeds.**
- o. Some, in shock and horror, will protest, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?" (Matt. 7:22).
- i. But they will hear in reply the most chilling, terrifying words that any human will ever hear: "I never knew you; depart from me, you who practice lawlessness" (Matt. 7:23).
 - ii. Those who refuse to plead guilty to their sins in this world, repent, and ask God for a pardon based on the substitutionary work of Christ will face trial after they die. And on that day, they will be pronounced guilty.
- V. The Sentence.

- a. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (20:14–15)
- b. The evidence is irrefutable, the verdict rendered; judgment will be swiftly carried out.
- c. As the sentence is passed, **death and Hades** (the grave, and the temporary place of punishment for everyone whose **name was not found written in the book of life**) **were thrown into the lake of fire**, meaning that they will go out of existence, swallowed up by the final hell.
 - i. Their inmates, currently suffering in their spirits only, will be united with specially designed resurrection bodies and cast into eternal hell (cf. Matt. 10:28).
 - ii. That final hell, described as **the lake of fire**, may already exist (cf. Matt. 25:41), but if so, it is currently unoccupied.
 - iii. Its first two occupants, the beast and the false prophet, will not arrive until the end of the Tribulation (19:20).
- d. The clearest and most vivid of the New Testament terms used to describe the final hell, **the lake of fire**, is *geenna* (Gehenna).
 - i. Gehenna is the New Testament word for the valley of Ben-Hinnom (also called Topheth; 2 Kings 23:10; Isa. 30:33; Jer. 7:31–32; 19:6), located southwest of Jerusalem.

- ii. In Old Testament times, idolatrous Israelites burned their children in the fire there as sacrifices to false gods (Jer. 19:2–6).
 - iii. In Jesus' day, it was the site of Jerusalem's garbage dump.
 - iv. The fires kept constantly burning there gave off foul-smelling smoke, and the dump was infested with maggots.
 - v. Sometimes the bodies of criminals were dumped there. The valley of Ben-Hinnom was thus an apt picture of eternal hell, one used repeatedly by Jesus (Matt. 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5).
 - vi. Hell will be God's eternal cosmic dump; its inmates will be burning as garbage forever.
- e. The blessed and holy participants in the first resurrection will not experience the second death (20:6).
- i. But the rest of the dead, who did not participate in the first resurrection (20:5), will face **the second death**, which is defined here as **the lake of fire**.
 - ii. Those who die in their sins in this present world of time and space will die a **second death** in eternity—they will be sentenced to **the lake of fire** forever.
- f. Scripture vividly portrays the various aspects of the final, fiery hell.

- i. **Fire** is used more than twenty times in the New Testament to depict the torment of hell (cf. vv. 10, 15; 14:10; 19:20; 21:8; Matt. 3:10–12; 5:22; 7:19; 13:40, 42, 50; 18:8–9; 25:41; Mark 9:44; Luke 3:9, 16–17; John 15:6; Heb. 10:27; Jude 7).
 1. Whether the **fire** of hell is literal, physical fire is unknown, since **the lake of fire** exists outside the created universe as we know it.
 2. If the fire here is symbolic, the reality it represents will be even more horrifying and painful.
 3. The Bible also depicts hell as a place of total darkness, which will isolate its inmates from each other (Matt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30; 2 Pet. 2:17; Jude 13); as a place where the worm (possibly emblematic of an accusing conscience) devouring the wicked will never die (Isa. 66:24; Mark 9:44); as a place of banishment from God’s kingdom (Matt. 8:12; 22:13); and as a place of unending sorrow, where there is “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Luke 13:28).
- g. There is only one way to avoid the terrifying reality of hell.
 - i. Those who confess their sins and ask God to forgive them on the basis of Christ’s substitutionary death on their behalf will be

delivered from God's eternal wrath (Rom. 5:9; 1 Thess. 1:10; 5:9).

- ii. For those who refuse to repent, the somber warning expressed by the writer of Hebrews will apply:
- iii. For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge His people." It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (Heb. 10:26–31)

¹ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 12–22*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 2000), 247–258.

Revelation # 43

New Heaven and New Earth

Revelation 21:1-8

I. Introduction

a. Read

- b. This text unfolds six features of the final and eternal heaven, called the new heaven and the new earth: the appearance of the new heaven and the new earth, the capital of the new heaven and the new earth, the supreme reality of the new heaven and the new earth, the changes in the new heaven and the new earth, the residents of the new heaven and the new earth, and the outcasts from the new heaven and the new earth.

II. The Appearance of the New Heaven and the New Earth.

a. 21:1

- b. As chapter 21 opens, all the sinners of all the ages, as well as Satan and his demons, have been sentenced to the lake of fire (20:10–15).

- c. With all ungodly men and angels banished forever and the present universe destroyed (20:11), God will create a new realm for the redeemed and the holy angels to dwell in forever.

- d. The phrase a new heaven and a new earth derives from two passages in Isaiah.

- i. In Isaiah 65:17 God declared, “For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former things will not be remembered or come to mind.”

- ii. In Isaiah 66:22 He added, “ ‘For just as the new heavens and the new earth which I make will endure before Me,’ declares the Lord, ‘so your offspring and your name will endure.’ ”

- iii. What Isaiah predicted is now a reality in John's vision.
- e. Kainos (new) does not mean new in a chronological sense, but new in a qualitative sense.
- f. The new heaven and the new earth will not merely succeed the present universe in chronological sequence; they will be something brand new, fresh, never before seen.
 - i. God must create a new heaven and a new earth because the first heaven and the first earth passed away.
 - ii. God originally created the earth to be suitable as mankind's permanent home.
 - iii. The entrance of sin, however, corrupted the earth and the universe, and God will destroy them (cf. 20:11).
 - iv. What lies ahead for the earth is not a nuclear or an ecological holocaust, but a divine judgment.
- g. The Old Testament describes the pollution and destruction of the present universe.
 - i. Job 15:15 declares that "the heavens are not pure in His sight."
 - ii. Isaiah 24:5 adds, "The earth is also polluted by its inhabitants, for they transgressed laws, violated statutes, broke the everlasting covenant."
 - iii. The Lord Jesus Christ confirmed that Old Testament teaching when He declared, "Heaven and earth will pass away" (Luke 21:33).
- h. The first hint of what the new heaven and new earth will be like comes in John's observation that there will no longer be any sea.
 - i. That will be a startling change from the present earth, nearly three- fourths of which is covered by water.
 - ii. The sea is essential to the present water-based environment.

- iii. All life on earth is dependent on water for its survival, and the earth is the only known place in the universe where there is sufficient water to sustain life.
 - iv. But believers' glorified bodies will not require water, unlike present human bodies, whose blood is 90 percent water, and whose flesh is 65 percent water.
 - v. Thus, the new heaven and the new earth will be based on a completely different life principle than the present universe.
 - vi. There will be a river in heaven, not of water, but of the "water of life" (22:1, 17).
 - vii. Without a sea, there can be no hydrological cycle, so that every feature of life and climate will be dramatically different.
- i. From a metaphorical perspective, commentators have seen the absence of the sea as symbolic of the absence of evil. Robert L. Thomas summarizes: Most justifiably see this void as representing an archetypical connotation in the sea (cf. 13:1; 20:13), a principle of disorder, violence, or unrest that marks the old creation (cf. Isa. 57:20; Ps. 107:25–28; Ezek. 28:8)... It is not that the sea is evil in itself, but that its aspect is one of hostility to mankind. For instance, the sea was what stood guard over John in his prison on Patmos and separated him from the churches of Asia... The sea is the first of seven evils that John says will no longer exist, the other six being death, mourning, weeping, pain (21:4), the curse (22:3), and night (21:25; 22:5). (Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary [Chicago: Moody, 1995], 440)
- III. The Capital of the New Heaven and the New Earth.
- a. 21:2
 - b. As the next stage in his vision unfolds, the apostle John moves from a description of the new heaven and the new

earth in general to a description of the capital city of the eternal state.

- c. Since the text plainly identifies it as such, there is no reason to doubt that the holy city, new Jerusalem, is an actual city.
 - i. The new Jerusalem is not heaven, but heaven's capital. It is not synonymous with heaven, because its dimensions are given in 21:16.
- d. It will be the third city named Jerusalem in redemptive history.
 - i. The first is the historic Jerusalem, the City of David, which currently exists in Palestine. Scripture repeatedly calls it the holy city (11:2; Neh. 11:1; Isa. 52:1; Dan. 9:24; Matt. 4:5; 27:53) because it was set apart for God's purposes.
 - ii. The second Jerusalem will be the restored Jerusalem where Christ will rule during the millennial kingdom.
 - iii. But the new Jerusalem does not belong to the first creation, so it is neither the historic city, nor the millennial city; it is the altogether new eternal city (cf. v. 10; 3:12; Heb. 11:10; 12:22–24; 13:14).
- e. The old Jerusalem, in ruins for twenty-five years when John received this vision, is too stained with sin, too much a part of the old creation to survive into the eternal state.
- f. The new Jerusalem is called the holy city because everyone in it is holy, since "blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection" (20:6).
- g. The concept of a city includes relationships, activity, responsibility, unity, socialization, communion, and cooperation.
- h. Unlike the evil cities of the present earth, the perfectly holy people in the new Jerusalem will live and work together in perfect harmony.

- i. In his vision, John saw the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, its “architect and builder” (Heb. 11:10).
 - i. The implication is that it already exists, a truth reinforced by Hebrews 12:22–23: “You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect.”
 - ii. All of heaven is currently contained in the new Jerusalem; it is separate from the present universe, which is tainted by sin.
- j. Believers who die go to the “heavenly Jerusalem,” where Jesus has gone before them to prepare a place for them (John 14:1–3).
 - i. But when God creates the new heaven and the new earth, the new Jerusalem will descend into the midst of that holy new universe (21:10), and serve as the dwelling place of the redeemed for all eternity.
 - ii. Since the throne of God will be in the new Jerusalem, which will come down to the new earth, that city will be the bond between the new earth and the new heaven.
- k. Further describing heaven’s capital city, John notes that it was made ready as a bride adorned for her husband.
- l. The city is pictured as a bride because it contains the bride and takes on her character.
- m. The imagery is drawn from a Jewish wedding, which typically had three parts.
 - i. First was the betrothal, which was like a modern engagement, but more legally binding.
 - ii. The betrothal of the Lord’s bride took place in eternity past when God pledged to His Son a redeemed people.

- iii. The next stage was the presentation, a time of celebration and feasting leading up to the actual wedding ceremony.
 - 1. The presentation of the bride took place following the Rapture of the church, when believers are taken to heaven.
 - iv. The third stage was the ceremony, which for the Lord's bride began at the marriage supper of the Lamb (19:7–9) and stretched through the millennial kingdom.
 - v. The final stage was the consummation, which corresponds to the eternal state.
 - 1. John saw the bride adorned for her husband because it was time for the consummation.
 - 2. Adorned is from the verb *kosmeō* (“to order,” or “to arrange”); the related noun *kosmos* (translated “adornment” in 1 Pet. 3:3) is the root of the English word “cosmetics.”
 - 3. The bride has become appropriately ordered in all her beauty.
 - n. By this point in Revelation, the bride concept expands to include not only the church (as it has since Acts 2), but also all the rest of the redeemed from all the ages who live forever in that eternal city (see the discussion of 19:9 in chapter 14 of this volume).
 - o. This is the moment described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:28: “When all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all.”
- IV. The Supreme Reality of the New Heaven and the New Earth,
- a. 21:3
 - b. The supreme glory and joy of heaven is the Person of God (cf. Ps. 73:25).

- c. Here, as twenty times previously in Revelation, a loud voice heralds an announcement of great importance.
 - i. The source of the voice is not revealed.
 - ii. It is not God (who speaks in v. 5), but is probably an angel (cf. 5:2; 7:2; 14:9, 15, 18; 19:17).
 - iii. The important announcement he makes is “Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men.”
- d. Skenē (tabernacle) can also mean “tent,” or “dwelling place.”
 - i. God will pitch His tent among His people; no longer will He be far off, distant, transcendent.
 - ii. No more will His presence be veiled in the human form of Jesus Christ, even in His millennial majesty, or in the cloud and pillar of fire, or inside the Holy of Holies.
 - iii. The amazing reality that “the pure in heart ... shall see God” (Matt. 5:8) will come to pass.
 - iv. Christ’s prayer, recorded in John 17:24, will be answered: “Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory which You have given Me” (cf. John 14:1–3; 1 Thess. 4:13–17).
 - v. There will be “no temple in [heaven], for the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple” (21:22).
 - vi. Their presence will permeate heaven and will not be confined to one place of manifestation.
- e. So staggering is this truth that the heavenly voice repeats it several ways.
 - i. To the mind-boggling reality that the tabernacle of God is among men he adds the statement that God will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them (cf. 22:3–4).
 - ii. This will be a manifestation of God’s glorious presence to His people like no other in redemptive history and

the culmination of all divine promise and human hope (Lev. 26:11–12; Jer. 24:7; 30:22; 31:1, 33; 32:38; Ezek. 37:27; 48:35; Zech. 2:10; 8:8; 2 Cor. 6:16).

- f. What will it be like to live in God's glorious presence in heaven?
- i. First, believers will enjoy fellowship with Him.
 1. The imperfect, sin-hindered fellowship that believers have with God in this life (1 John 1:3) will become full, complete, and unlimited.
 2. In his classic book on heaven entitled *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, seventeenth-century Puritan Richard Baxter describes the intimate communion with God that believers will enjoy in heaven: Doubtless as God advanceth our senses, and enlargeth our capacity, so will he advance the happiness of those senses and fill up with himself all that capacity.... We shall then have light without a candle, and perpetual day without the sun.... We shall then have enlightened understandings without Scripture, and be governed without a written law; for the Lord will perfect his law in our hearts, and we shall be all perfectly taught of God. We shall have joy, which we drew not from the promises, nor fetched home by faith or hope. We shall have communion without sacraments, without this fruit of the vine, when Christ shall drink it new with us in his Father's kingdom and refresh us with the comforting wine of immediate enjoyment. To have necessities, but no supply, is the case of them in hell. To have necessity supplied by means of the creatures, is the case of us on earth. To have

necessity supplied immediately from God, is the case of the saints in heaven. To have no necessity at all, is the prerogative of God himself. (The Practical Works of Richard Baxter [reprint; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981], 7, 16)

ii. Second, believers will see God as He is.

1. In 1 John 3:2 the apostle John writes, “Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be.
2. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is.” Such an unveiled view of God is impossible for mortal men.
3. No living person has ever seen God in the fullness of His glory (John 1:18; 6:46; 1 John 4:12); He is invisible (Col. 1:15; 1 Tim. 1.17) and “dwells in unapproachable light” (1 Tim. 6:16; cf. Ps. 104:2), exposure to which would mean instant death for any living person (Ex. 33:20). But in heaven, “the pure in heart ... shall see God” (Matt. 5:8), since they will be perfectly holy. They will be given an eternal and expanded vision of God manifest in His shining glory (21:11, 23; 22:5).
4. Even the saints in heavenly glory will not be able to comprehend all the infinite majesty of God’s wondrous being. But they will see all that glorified beings are able to comprehend.
5. Is it any wonder that Paul, thinking of the glory of heaven, had “the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better” (Phil. 1:23)?
6. In her marvelous but seldom sung hymn, “My Savior First of All,” Fanny Crosby echoed Paul’s

sentiments: When my life work is ended and I cross the swelling tide, When the bright and glorious morning I shall see, I shall know my Redeemer when I reach the other side, And His smile will be the first to welcome me. Thru the gates to the city, in a robe of spotless white, He will lead me where no tears will ever fall, In the glad song of ages I shall mingle with delight—But I long to meet my Savior first of all.

iii. Third, believers will worship God.

1. Every glimpse of heaven in Revelation reveals the redeemed and the angels in worship (4:10; 5:14; 7:11; 11:1, 16; 19:4).
2. That is not surprising, since Jesus said in John 4:23 that “true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers.”
3. In heaven, the glorified, perfected saints will offer God perfect worship.

iv. Fourth, believers will serve God (22:3).

1. It is said of the saints in heaven pictured in 7:15 that “they serve [God] day and night in His temple.”
2. Believers’ capacity for heavenly service will reflect their faithfulness in this life.
3. All believers will be rewarded with capacities for heavenly service, but those capacities will differ (1 Cor. 3:12–15; 4:5).

g. Finally, and most astounding of all, the Lord will serve believers. Jesus told a parable reflecting that truth in Luke 12:35–40:

- h. Be dressed in readiness, and keep your lamps lit. Be like men who are waiting for their master when he returns from the wedding feast, so that they may immediately open the door to him when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master will find on the alert when he comes; truly I say to you, that he will gird himself to serve, and have them recline at the table, and will come up and wait on them. Whether he comes in the second watch, or even in the third, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.
- i. But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have allowed his house to be broken into. You too, be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour that you do not expect.
- j. Jesus pictures Himself as a wealthy nobleman, who returns to His estate after a long trip. Finding that his servants ministered faithfully in His absence, He rewards them by taking the role of a servant and preparing a feast for them. So will it be for believers in heaven, forever to be served a heavenly feast of joy by their Lord.
- k. The Changes in the New Heaven and the New Earth
 - l.
 - m. and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.” And He who sits on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” And He said, “Write, for these words are faithful and true.” Then He said to me, “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.” (21:4–6a)
 - n. Heaven will be so dramatically different from the present world that to describe it requires the use of negatives, as well as the previous positives. To describe what is totally beyond

human understanding also requires pointing out how it differs from present human experience.

- o. The first change from their earthly life believers in heaven will experience is that God will wipe away every tear from their eyes (cf. 7:17; Isa. 25:8). That does not mean that people who arrive in heaven will be crying and God will comfort them. They will not, as some imagine, be weeping as they face the record of their sins. There is no such record, because “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1), since Christ “bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed” (1 Pet. 2:24). What it declares is the absence of anything to be sorry about—no sadness, no disappointment, no pain. There will be no tears of misfortune, tears over lost love, tears of remorse, tears of regret, tears over the death of loved ones, or tears for any other reason.
- p. Another dramatic difference from the present world will be that in heaven there will no longer be any death (cf. Isa. 25:8). The greatest curse of human existence will be no more. “Death,” as Paul promised, “is swallowed up in victory” (1 Cor. 15:54). Both Satan, who had the power of death (Heb. 2:14) and death itself will have been cast into the lake of fire (20:10, 14).
- q. Nor will there be any mourning, or crying in heaven. The grief, sorrow, and distress that produce mourning and its outward manifestation, crying, will not exist in heaven. This glorious reality will be the fulfillment of Isaiah 53:3–4: “He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hide their face He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He

carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.” When Christ bore believers’ sins on the cross, He also bore their sorrows, since sin is the cause of sorrow.

- r. The perfect holiness and absence of sin that will characterize heaven will also mean that there will be no more pain. On the cross, Jesus was “pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed” (Isa. 53:5). While the healing in view in that verse is primarily spiritual healing, it also includes physical healing. Commenting on Jesus’ healing of Peter’s mother-in-law, Matthew 8:17 says, “This was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet: ‘He Himself took our infirmities and carried away our diseases.’ ” The healing ministry of Jesus was a preview of the well-being that will characterize the millennial kingdom and the eternal state. The glorified sin free bodies believers will possess in heaven will not be subject to pain of any kind.
- s. All those changes that will mark the new heaven and the new earth indicate that the first things have passed away. Old human experience related to the original, fallen creation is gone forever, and with it all the mourning, suffering, sorrow, disease, pain, and death that has characterized it since the Fall. Summarizing those changes in a positive way, He who sits on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” The One who sits on the throne is the same One “from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them” (20:11). As noted in chapter 17 of this volume, the present universe will be uncreated. The new heaven and the new earth will be truly a new creation, and not merely a refurbishing of the present heaven and earth. In that forever

new creation, there will be no entropy, no atrophy, no decay, no decline, and no waste.

- t. Overwhelmed by all that he had seen, John seems to have lost his concentration. Thus, God Himself, the glorious, majestic One on the throne said to him “Write, for these words are faithful and true” (cf. 1:19). The words John was commanded by God to write are as faithful and true (cf. 22:6) as the One revealing them to him (3:14; 19:11). Though the present “heaven and earth will pass away,” still God’s “words will not pass away” (Luke 21:33). There will be an end to the universe, but not to the truth God reveals to His people. Whether or not men understand and believe that truth, it will come to pass.
- u. Also by way of summary, the majestic voice of the One sitting on heaven’s throne said to John, “It is done.” Those words are reminiscent of Jesus’ words on the cross, “It is finished!” (John 19:30). Jesus’ words marked the completion of the work of redemption; these words mark the end of redemptive history. It is the time of which Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:24–28:
- v. Then comes the end, when He hands over the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be abolished is death. For He has put all things in subjection under His feet. But when He says, “All things are put in subjection,” it is evident that He is excepted who put all things in subjection to Him. When all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all.

- w. The One who sits on the throne is qualified to declare the end of redemptive history, because He is the Alpha and the Omega (the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet; cf. 1:8), the beginning and the end (cf. Isa. 44:6; 48:12). God started history, and He will end it, and all of it has unfolded according to His sovereign plan. That this same phrase is applied to the Lord Jesus Christ in 22:13 offers proof of His full deity and equality with the Father.
- x. The Residents of the New Heaven and the New Earth
- y. I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost. He who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son. (21:6b–7)
- z. Two descriptive phrases reveal who will live in the glorious new heaven and new earth. First, a citizen of heaven is described as one who thirsts. That phrase signifies those who, recognizing their desperate spiritual need, “hunger and thirst for righteousness” (Matt. 5:6). They are the ones to whom Isaiah cries out, “Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost” (Isa. 55:1). Those who will be redeemed and enter heaven are those who are dissatisfied with their hopeless, lost condition and crave God’s righteousness with every part of their being. The psalmist expressed that strong desire in Psalm 42:1–2: “As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God; when shall I come and appear before God?” The promise to such earnest seekers is that their thirst will be satisfied. God will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost. To the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well Jesus promised, “Everyone who drinks of this water will

thirst again; but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life” (John 4:13–14). It is the water of which He spoke in John 7:37–38: “Now on the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, ‘If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, “From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.” ’ ” This same promise is also repeated in 22:17 (cf. 7:17): “The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost.” The water in all those passages symbolizes eternal life. Those who thirst for and passionately seek salvation are the ones who will receive it and enjoy the eternal bliss of heaven.

- aa. Second, heaven belongs to he who overcomes. An overcomer, according to 1 John 5:4–5, is one who exercises saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The overcomer is the person who in faith drinks the water of salvation freely offered by God. John uses this distinctive term for believers in the closing promise of each of the letters to the seven churches (see the discussion of 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21 in Revelation 1–11, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* [Chicago: Moody, 1999], 53–141). The promise here to those who overcome is that they will inherit these things. They will “obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for [them]” (1 Pet. 1:4). They will enjoy perfection of soul (Heb. 12:23) and body (20:6; John 5:28–29; Rom. 8:23; 1 Cor. 15:35–44; 2 Cor. 5:2; Phil. 3:21; 1 John 3:2) forever in the bliss of the new heaven and the new earth.

- bb. But the most wonderful promise to the one who overcomes, who thirsts for righteousness, is God's promise I will be his God (cf. Gen. 17:7–8; Ex. 6:7; 29:45; Lev. 26:12; Deut. 29:13; 2 Sam. 7:24; Jer. 7:23; 11:4; 24:7; 30:22; Ezek. 11:20; 34:24; 36:28; 37:23, 27; Zech. 8:8). Equally amazing is God's promise that the one who overcomes will be My son. Even in this life it is the believer's privilege to be the adopted son of the God of the universe (John 1:12; Rom. 8:14–17; 2 Cor. 6:18; Gal. 4:5; Eph. 1:5; Heb. 12:5–9; 1 John 3:1). But only in heaven, when believers come into their inheritance (1 Pet. 1:4), will that adoption be fully realized (Rom. 8:23).
- cc. The Outcasts from the New Heaven and the New Earth
- dd. “But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.” (21:8)
- ee. John concludes his overview of the new heaven and the new earth with a serious and solemn warning. He delineates those who will be excluded from any participation in the blessings of heaven—all unforgiven and unredeemed sinners. There are similar lists of such sinners in 22:15; Romans 1:28–32; 1 Corinthians 6:9–10; Galatians 5:19–21; and 2 Timothy 3:2–5.
- ff. The first group excluded from heaven are the cowardly. These are the ones who lack endurance (cf. Matt. 24:13; Mark 8:35). They fell away when their faith was challenged or opposed, because their faith was not genuine. Jesus described such people in the parable of the soils: “The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and

when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away” (Matt. 13:20–21). These are the ones who “shrink back to destruction” (Heb. 10:39). In John 8:31 Jesus defined those whose faith is genuine as those who continue in His Word. (For further discussion of this issue, see my books *The Gospel According to Jesus* [rev. ed., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994], and *The Gospel According to the Apostles* [Nashville: Word, 2000].)

gg. Because they lack saving faith and are unbelieving, their disloyalty excludes them from heaven. They are also abominable (vile, polluted, detestable, wholly caught up in wickedness and evil), murderers, immoral persons, sorcerers (from the Greek word *pharmakos*, from which the English words “pharmacy” and “pharmaceuticals” derive; that indicates the inclusion of those who use mind-altering drugs in occult religion), idolaters, and liars. Those whose lives are characterized by such things give evidence that they are not saved and will never enter the heavenly city. On the contrary, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death. In contrast to the eternal bliss of the righteous in heaven, the wicked will suffer eternal torment in hell. (For a further discussion of the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death, see chapter 17 of this volume.)

hh. The new heaven and the new earth await believers and the final hell awaits resurrected unbelievers. For believers, it will be a universe of eternal happiness as they dwell forever in the glorious presence of God. For unbelievers, it will be a terrifying place of unbearable torment and unrelieved misery away from God’s presence (2 Thess. 1:9). The choices men and women make in this life determine in which of those realms they will live forever.

