

Revelation Bible Study #48

For lay leaders and deacons to conduct after the Sunday service, or during a midweek Bible study session.

Revelation 20:7-15

7 And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison **8** and will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea. **9** And they marched up over the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, but fire came down from heaven and consumed them, **10** and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

11 Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. **12** And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. **13** And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. **14** Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. **15** And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Introduction

Lutheranism is known for its Law/Gospel distinction. These are the two “voices” of Scripture, wherein one's spiritual state determines much of the application of the text. The First Commandment, “you shall have no other gods before Me,” condemns the unjustified while guiding the saved; these are the voice of the Law to nonbelievers and believers. The Law warns humanity, condemns the damned, and leads the saved. The Gospel presents the good news of God's blessings to all believers and their justification by faith in Christ, who was crucified for our sins. When a nonbeliever reads Gospel texts, he receives the offer of salvation; when a believer reads them, he receives assurance of salvation.

The majority of Scriptural content is geared toward the voice of the Law. Adam and Eve fall in Eden, mankind is drowned in the Flood, Egyptian idolatry is condemned with the Exodus, the Israelites have their painful wilderness wanderings. The conquest of Canaan punishes the paganism of the nations, but it is followed by the Israelites' apostasy during the period of the Judges. During the period of the kings of Israel and Judah few monarchs are found to be faithful, terminating in the Assyrian Captivity and the Babylonian Exile. Even after some of the Exiles are returned to the promised land, their worship is halfhearted and their conduct is condemned by the prophets. The Old Testament screams the Law to its readers as it recounts the abysmal record of human failure from Eden to Judea.

The remainder of Revelation's twentieth chapter features the last gasp of human depravity, as unbelieving mankind follows the devil's call and organizes under a new wave of deceit. This results in the mass death spoken of in the nineteenth chapter, wherein Christ slaughters all who rebel against Him. *Then*, we see the final telos of the Second Use of the Law: damnation. This passage provides insight into the fate of the damned, but must be read carefully. At the Great White Throne, the final Judgment is pronounced upon all nonbelievers, leading to the rest of Revelation speaking almost exclusively Gospel matters to the reader thereafter.

Vs.7-9

7 And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison 8 and will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea. 9 And they marched up over the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, but fire came down from heaven and consumed them,

For the duration of the Church era, the devil is bound in a pit – this is to say, he no longer has the ability to prevent people from hearing and believing in the Gospel.¹ But when it is time for him to face the ultimate judgment of eternal conscious torment, he must be released from his abode. Naturally, when he is unbound he will do what he was doing beforehand; deceiving the nations and using them against God's people. Here St. John provides more perspective on his previous vision of this event, wherein he saw “the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against Him who was sitting on the horse and against His army.”²

Here, St. John more explicitly connects his vision to Ezekiel's prophecy. The previous proclamation that the birds of the air would gorge themselves on the flesh of nonbelievers was a *hint* at it, utilizing the same language as Ezekiel's oracle.³ Now the Apostle explicitly defines Gog and Magog as the “nations that are at the four corners of the earth,” meaning *all* nonbelieving humanity. In the latter days, the devil will successfully deceive nonbelievers into a kind of militancy against the Christian faith, and they will follow his lead on the matter.

This ought not be interpreted *physically*, as though the militaries of the world will attempt to march on Jerusalem (though that may happen some day, it is unconnected to this passage). This is especially untenable since St. John does not utilize terms for Gog and Magog that would suggest mere *states* or *countries*, but *nations*. He speaks of all humanity as understood in terms of the races of man. The Apostle is saying that every unregenerate man and woman of all ages, already predisposed to resist the Gospel, will become even more actively hostile to it. If this were interpreted as a physical matter, and all the unregenerate were gathered for battle, we would be faced with absurdities like hospice patients being wheeled around next to the able-bodied faithless, or extremely overweight individuals struggling to march with normal soldiers. It is more hermeneutically sound to understand that the “beloved city” is the *Church* on earth, and Christians everywhere shall experience worse persecution.⁴

This brief era of worsened conditions for Christians is ended with the death of all nonbelievers. Previously, St. John wrote that Christ kills them with the sword which emerges from His mouth.⁵ This is of course symbolic for the power of His Word, with the sentence of death being pronounced on those who bear the mark of the beast. Here the killing is portrayed as fire coming from heaven, reminiscent of Elijah calling fire down from heaven to kill soldiers sent by Ahaziah the king.⁶ In a demonstration of His Deity, our Lord Jesus will destroy *all* of His enemies by simply pronouncing it, whether this demonstration manifests in physical fire or nonbelievers simply drop dead. Also, like the moment when Elijah called down fire during the contest with the prophets of baal,⁷ this moment will extinguish false religion, only this time it will be abolished in its entirety as opposed to the temporary reprieve from apostasy as established by Jezebel and Ahab. The reader must thus expect for there to be a time (perhaps this very time) in which nonbelievers are mobilized; Christ will end it before the devil's dream of renewed mass-nightmare persecution can truly begin.

1 Revelation 20:3

2 Revelation 19:19

3 Ezekiel 39:17-19

4 Unless of course they already *are*. The current circumstances worldwide suggest that we may be living in that “short time” in which the devil roams free before Christ's Return.

5 Revelation 19:21

6 2 Kings 1

7 1 Kings 18

Vs.10

10 and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

Before any one else is thrown in the lake of fire, the devil and the beast and false prophet are cast there without so much as a trial. Their guilt is so self-evident that there is no need for them to have so much as a moment in “court.” One may note that demons appear absent from the text; in fact they are present. St. John assumes that we have already read the Synoptic Gospels, wherein our Lord Jesus says that the fires were prepared for satan and the demons together.⁸ Since the judgment on the Great White Throne occurs *after* this moment, no human has gone to the lake of fire yet. When St. John says “the beast and the false prophet,” this is thus a shorthand for the demonic powers that were behind the world system and false religions (especially heresies).

The exact nature of the lake of fire is a mystery. The word “lake” here is translated from λίμνην,^{9,10} which typically depicts a pond or other small body of water. It is an odd choice of words, considering that so many shall be damned. Thus we are invited to ask how so many shall be there. If the lake of fire is supposed to be understood in a physical manner, it does not need to be very large to fit all of the damned. To illustrate, let us use a familiar lake to St. John,¹¹ the Sea of Galilee. This particular lake is approximately one cubic mile (or four cubic kilometers) in total volume; one cubic mile is 147,197,952,000 cubic feet.¹² With room to spare, one cubic mile could fit all 8 billion humans living on earth. If the Population Reference Bureau is to be believed, one hundred and seventeen billion humans have lived since the dawn of time, requiring a lake of fire that is no less than ten cubic miles.^{13,14} Again, if St. John wants us to see his language as physical in nature, this is a reasonable volume for fitting all of the damned.

Yet to say that the lake of fire is being described physically in this fashion is to introduce an inconsistent hermeneutic. The Apostle has given us so much symbolism that it would be absurd to portray damnation as the *only* matter about which he wrote in an entirely plain fashion. The word translated as “lake” has a cognate word, λιμὴν,^{15,16} which means *harbor*. This is an important distinction on account of *Christ's* descriptions of hell, which includes men being capable of communication despite their suffering.¹⁷ Whether there is a literal lake of fire or not, there is most certainly a *harbor* upon which the damned are “dropped off,” being unable to cross back into Paradise. Here, they receive the just reward for their wickedness. For the devil, the beast and the false prophet (which again is a rephrasing of “the devil and his angels”), this involves constant, unending torment. For the rest of the damned, however, instead of being packed into lava like a can of infernal sardines, there is graduated punishment.

Vs.11-13

11 Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. **12** And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books

8 Matthew 25:41

9 Transliterated “limnen,” Strong's #3041

10 <https://biblehub.com/greek/3041.htm>

11 The Apostle was of course a fisherman in Galilee before being called to ministry.

12 For more absurd calculations:

https://andreafarmer.weebly.com/uploads/4/5/0/1/45015697/how_many_bodies_can_fit_ppt.pdf

13 <https://www.prb.org/articles/how-many-people-have-ever-lived-on-earth/>

14 The statistics of this study are **not** accurate, since the Earth is only six thousand years old. Nonetheless, these numbers do illustrate the overall point.

15 Transliterated “limnein,” Strong's #3040

16 <https://biblehub.com/greek/3040.htm>

17 Luke 16:19-31

were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. **13** And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done.

“Then I saw,” that is, St. John is emphasizing this pericope as a vision connected to the previous one. While the text assumes a general resurrection of all who have shed their mortal coil, this judgment is for nonbelievers *only*. Early on, St. John has recounted previously that the souls of believers are in the Throne Room, periodically engaging in liturgy with the twenty four elders and the living creatures.¹⁸ Whosoever belongs to Christ is not judged here, for they are already *very much* alive to God,¹⁹ and thus not counted among those who are dead. When the book of life is opened, it recounts those who are saved by virtue of believing and being Baptized, which is the sole litmus test Christ gives for salvation.²⁰ Everyone *else* is judged according to their deeds, by which the intensity of their eternal punishment is determined.

There is a sort of judgment in which the believers partake, but it is separate from this moment on account of believers being *alive* to God. Christ says that when He returns, He will separate the “sheep” (believers) from the “goats” (the damned); the sheep are rewarded for their good deeds without their sins being counted against them, while the goats are condemned for their sins without their good deeds being counted in their favor.²¹ This tells us that the damned are subject to progressive punishment, and it is only the extent of their wickedness which determines their fate: there is no ameliorating the “nice” atheist’s damnation simply because he was “nice.”

Vs.14-15

14 Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. **15** And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Here any form of “full preterist” interpretation is rendered invalid. When Christ returns, death and the abode of the dead will no longer be a facet of reality for those who belong to Jesus. On the other hand, they will be a constant presence among the damned – hence the rich man shown being in “hades” in Luke 16 despite his damnation being evidently after the Final Judgment. That said, this “second death,” wherein the first death and hades are still present, must be understood in the context of what death truly *is*. Death is a separation; the body becomes separated from the soul. Unregenerate men are dead to God, being separate from fellowship with Him but animated as He offers them salvation throughout their earthly lives. The second death is the state of being separated more deeply from God, being placed apart from any further opportunity of receiving salvation, fellowship, or communication.

One thing to note though is that in a certain sense God still *provides* for the damned. Damnation is not the kind of suffering which renders a mortal’s mind non-functional, lest God self-condemn His own justice; if they are being tormented without knowing why they are tormented, then God would essentially be tormenting children or the mentally disabled. Their reason and memory are preserved. Since the bodies of the damned are required for whichever *tactile* aspect of their torments, this also requires continued bodily integrity. Awareness, reason, and bodily integrity are all things which are contingent; they cannot be preserved by the rational agent without a Preserver who serves as the bedrock reason for their existence. Since God first gave them the blessings of consciousness and reason and physical bodies during their earthly lives, it is important to note that He *preserves* these things actively in the damned. While some commentaries would prefer annihilation, such would be *worse* than the eternal torment posited by St. John – which for some is more painful an experience than for others.

¹⁸ Revelation 7:9-17

¹⁹ Romans 6:11. We cannot stress enough the importance of letting the Scriptures define such terms as “alive” and “dead!”

²⁰ Mark 16:16

²¹ Matthew 25:31-46