

# Revelation 20:11-15

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*The dead are judged by their deeds and those whose names are not found in the book of life are thrown into the lake of fire, which is the second death.*

John's vision continues with another *Then I saw* statement, which signifies a continuing in the sequence of events. This time, he sees *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* (v 11).

This is directly following the description of the devil being thrown into the "lake of fire and brimstone" in Revelation 20:10, so we are turning our eyes to the One who has sent the fire that came down from heaven. We have been in the *throne* room many times during the course of Revelation, so this is a return to that setting that reminds us who has been in charge this whole time: God. The word *throne* translates the Greek word "thronos" which occurs over forty times in Revelation, highlighting Revelation's emphasis on establishing the ruling authorities of the heavens and earth. This finalizes that question: it is God. He is on the *throne*.

The word for *presence* in verse 11 is used elsewhere in the New Testament as "face" or "appearance," indicating that it was the face of God that *earth and heaven fled away* from. In Exodus 33, the Lord tells Moses "You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live" (Exodus 33:20), and instead allows Moses to see His back, but not His face.

*So earth and heaven fled away* from God's face because it was too powerful, but *no place was found for them*—they are dispensed with, and will be followed by a new heaven and earth (Revelation 21:1).

The *presence* of God cannot be escaped. This is echoed in Psalm 139, which says:

"Where can I go from Your Spirit?  
Or where can I flee from Your presence?  
If I ascend to heaven, You are there;  
If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there.  
If I take the wings of the dawn,  
If I dwell in the remotest part of the sea,  
Even there Your hand will lead me,  
And Your right hand will lay hold of me."  
(Psalm 139:7-10)

In the psalm, this is meant as a comforting fact: there is nowhere that anyone can go that is too far for God to reach them. He can come to anyone in the pit. When they have run far away from Him He can bring them back.

But just as there is nowhere we can go that is out of the reach of God's love, there is also nowhere anyone can go to escape His justice, which also extends to everywhere. It would seem that God's presence will be a source of torment for those who rejected Him.

That *heaven and earth* have *fled away* from the face of God could indicate that at this point heaven and earth have been destroyed (2 Peter 3:7; Revelation 21:1). That would mean that all who were alive on earth are now passed into the spirit realm. Many are now in God's presence. It would seem that Jesus's presence has melted *heaven and earth* in the fire of His unveiled glory.

The next *And I saw* statement continues in verse 12 with *And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne* (vs 12).

Earlier in chapter 20 some believers "came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years" (Revelation 20:4). This represents the group of believers who are those who have "overcome," a title given promises throughout Revelation 2-3 (Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 26, 3:5, 12, 21).

Believers who "overcome" are those who served Christ as faithful witnesses, and sacrificed themselves for the good news of Jesus. In Revelation 3, Jesus describes Himself as having overcome (Revelation 3:21). Jesus overcame temptation and rejection by the world. In spite of resistance, He continued to do the work of His Father. He was a faithful witness, and was willing to die, which He did. To be an overcomer means to sacrifice our life for the cause of Christ, being a faithful witness (Greek: "martyr") and possibly a martyr.

Right after we learned of those [overcomers](#) who were raised during the first resurrection, it says that "the rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed" (Revelation 20:5). This "rest of the dead" includes all those who were not raised in the first resurrection. This might include all nonbelievers as well as believers who were not overcomers.

At this point in Revelation 20 the thousand years has come to an end, and so *the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne* now are apparently all those who were not raised in the first resurrection.

As they were *standing before the throne, 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* (vs 13).

The idea that we will be judged for our actions is not a new concept. As it says in Romans 2:6, God "will render to each person according to his deeds." Apparently the books opened here are books with recorded deeds for all that has happened in the history of the earth. Since unbelievers appear to be included in this group, it seems there will be varying rewards for unbelievers as well. This is indicated by Jesus's statements regarding the judgement of the Jewish city of Capernaum, that served as His headquarters, as compared to Gentile cities (Matthew 11:22-24).

The *book of life* is the only one (of an unknown number) of the books that is mentioned by name. The *book of life* is referenced in Philippians 4, where Paul mentions "the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life" (Philippians 4:3). It is also mentioned by name in

the letter to the church in Sardis in Revelation 3, where those who overcome are promised that God “will not erase his name from the book of life” (Revelation 3:5).

We know that the [overcomers](#) who participated in the first resurrection will have their names written in the book of life. We also know that *if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire* (Revelation 20:15). Therefore, it follows that those who participated in the first resurrection will not be *thrown into the lake of fire*.

Verse 13 adds to the scene of the dead being gathered before the great white throne, *and the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds* (vs 13).

Since this is a judgment of *deeds*, it seems this is not a judgement dividing those who are believers from those who are not, as when Jesus divides the sheep from the goats (Matthew 25:32-33). It would seem that division is done elsewhere. Becoming one of Jesus’s “sheep” is a simple matter of faith, not a matter of deeds (John 3:14-15; Ephesians 2:8-9).

We saw *the dead, the great and small* (vs 12) which were before the great white throne earlier, and now *the dead* which were in *the sea* are added to that number who will be judged *according to their deeds*.

*The sea* is where the beast arises out of (Revelation 13:1). We can presume this represents the earth because the beast arises from the earth. Therefore, it would seem that this gathering before the *great white throne* represents all who did not participate in the first resurrection, all who have died from the destruction of the earth, together with all who had died before.

The *dead* who are given up out of *death and Hades*, which *gave up the dead which were in them* could include both the Paradise side as well as the Sheol side of *Hades* ([see article on Hades](#) ). Some argue that Paradise was already emptied out by this point. If it had not been already, it is now, as all are disgorged in order to be judged before the great white throne.

It is worth noting that the Old and New Testament were originally written in different languages (Hebrew and Greek, respectively). In Acts 2:31, the Apostle Peter quotes Psalm 16:10, which prophetically says of the coming Messiah, “For You will not abandon my soul to Sheol.” Then in Acts, the Hebrew (Old Testament) word “Sheol” is rendered “Hades” in Greek. It therefore follows that when Sheol is used in the Old Testament it would be synonymous with “Hades”

when used to refer to the place of afterlife.

Throughout the Old and New Testaments are references to Sheol and Hades. Some are listed below; these references allow us to gain a fuller picture of what it is and its use:

- A town is condemned to Hades for their lack of repentance (Matthew 11:23). This refers to the town’s demise.

- Peter says that when Jesus was resurrected, that he was not “abandoned to Hades” (Acts 2:31), in which he quotes Psalm 16:10. This refers to the fact that Jesus was resurrected from the dead.
- In Luke, Hades is described as a place with a “great chasm” dividing a place of torment from a place of paradise (Luke 16:22-26).
- Hosea tells us that death and Hades go together, and that they will be the last enemy defeated (Hosea 13:14), a passage that is quoted in 1 Corinthians 15:54-57.
- The “gates of Hades will not overpower” the church (Matthew 16:18). This likely refers to Jesus’s message of life and resurrection, that will overcome death.
- Jesus has the keys to Hades (Revelation 1:18), indicating that Jesus has authority over death and Hades.
- Death and Hades are commissioned as one of the four horsemen of the apocalypse (Revelation 6:8).

*Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire* (vs 14). Here the *lake of fire* is given a synonym, which is *the second death*. It is appointed unto all humans to die once, then be judged (Hebrews 9:27). But it appears some will die twice—those who are consumed into the lake of fire.

Death is separation. Physical death occurs when our human spirit separates from our physical body. Those permanently stationed in the *second death* might experience a permanent separation from God’s design for humans. It could mean that those who rejected God are now doomed to live forever in His presence, but are separated from knowing Him (John 17:3).

Because *death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire* (vs 14), this means that the *lake of fire* is not the same as *Hades*. *Hades* is a place, but it is a different place from *the lake of fire* that is also called the *second death*.

*Hades* will be consumed in the *lake of fire*, so at this point in Revelation it doesn’t exist anymore; it is no longer a place for the dead.

The *lake of fire* itself could be a place or a condition. Since it seems that God’s unveiled presence melted *heaven and earth* (vs 11) then it stands to reason that being in God’s presence would be an experience of punishment for those who don’t believe. Scripture asserts that God is a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:29).

That *death and Hades* are thrown into *the lake of fire* at the end of the age is a wonderful event. *Death* is a big negative; we don’t want either *death* or *Hades*. Now, at the end of the ages of this heaven and earth, both are consumed in *the lake of fire*. This is a wonderful development. It is likely connected to the statement we will see in the next chapter: “...and there will no longer be any death...” (Revelation 21:4).

Chapter 20 ends: *And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire* (vs 15).

It follows that those who did not believe upon Jesus during their lives upon this earth will not have their names written in the *book of life* and that they will be *thrown into the lake of fire*. This is the sad, final existence for those who refused to accept God's free gift of eternal life, through an act of simple faith (John 3:14-15).

That leaves a question about the believers who are not [overcomers](#). Given that the overcomers in Revelation 3:5 are told that their names will not be erased from the *book of life*, we can infer that some believers who fail to overcome will have their names removed from the *book of life*.

Since these non-overcoming believers' names were in the *book of life* at one point, it would follow that they still escape being consumed by judgement fire; judgement will not be their final destination. God's gifts are irrevocable (Romans 11:29) and eternal life is a gift given to all who believe (John 3:16).

The final destination for all believers is to be conformed to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29). But becoming conformed to the image of Christ requires refining. It appears that believers get to choose whether to be refined during their lives on earth by overcoming the rejection of the world, or to be refined at the judgement seat of Jesus, in God's judgement fire.

This seems to be what Paul had in mind when he stated of believers at the judgement seat of Jesus:

“If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.”  
(1 Corinthians 3:14-15)

We can see from this 1 Corinthians passage that believers who do not live a life of faithfulness will pass through judgement still in possession of their spiritual lives—they will be “saved, yet so as through fire.” This is because they have received the gift of new birth (John 3:3-8).

But believers who declined the opportunity to walk in this life as faithful witnesses will have their deeds “burned up” at the judgment of Jesus. We can surmise that the disobedient believers will be like the first generation of Israel that came out of Egypt; they will still be God's people, but will not possess the reward of their inheritance (Colossians 3:23).

It can be viewed that God's judgement fire is the same for believers as well as unbelievers. As scripture asserts, our God is a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:29), and God is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8). For those believers who missed the opportunity to be refined by fiery trials in life through a walk of faith, they will apparently need to endure judgment fire in order to be refined into their ultimate destination, the image of Christ (Romans 8:29).

It is the refining process that conforms believers to the image of Christ. It is not fun, but it is worthwhile and necessary to gain all God has for us. This is the mindset scripture exhorts us to adopt (Romans 12:1-2; Philippians 2:5-11; Hebrews 12:1-2).

Although God's judgement fire is applied to both believers and unbelievers, the purpose of the judgment differs. Unbelievers will be consumed in God's judgement fire, while believers will be refined (see commentary on Hebrews 10:26-31 ). Unbelievers will experience the *second death* in the *lake of fire* and be consumed forever. But believers will experience refining judgment fire for a time and be refined before they can be reunited with Jesus and be able to be in His presence.

Fire is often used throughout the Bible as a means of purification. Take for example Isaiah 6, where the prophet Isaiah received a vision of God in His throne room (Isaiah 6:5-7).

Isaiah knew that he was not holy enough to stand before God, so when he found himself in the presence of God's power, he experienced a desire to be purified. This purification took place by fire, with a coal from the sacrificial altar, in order that Isaiah's sins may be taken away. It seems reasonable that, while painful, believers will have a similar attitude of desiring any remaining uncleanness to be removed.

Fiery trials should not surprise believers. No one desires difficulty, but when it comes, we should rejoice in the knowledge that as we share the sufferings of Christ, we will also one day experience the glory of Christ (Romans 8:17).

As it says in 1 Peter 4:

“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation.”  
(1 Peter 4:12-13)

All will experience the fiery trials of life, but not all will benefit. Those who choose the way of the world will accumulate deeds that will be burned up at God's judgment seat of Christ, as we see in 1 Corinthians 3:13-15.

The work referred to in 1 Corinthians 3 is what believers do here on earth. If we suffer now as faithful witnesses, and are overcomers, then we will have rewards to come after the refining process. If we choose to avoid rejection from the world, and instead choose to follow the ways of the world, we will have only the rewards of the world to show for our efforts. The rewards of the world stay in the world. When we come to God's judgment, the deeds done for the world will burn. The deeds we do in order to please Jesus will be refined like gold and diamonds, and we will gain great rewards for our service ([see our article on Overcomers](#) ).

In the last chapter of Revelation, Jesus exhorts His servants to remember that His judgment is coming, and have it shape their every decision, living for His reward. Jesus exclaims:

“And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward *is* with Me, to give to every one according to his work.”  
(Revelation 22:12)

## **Biblical Text**

**<sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, 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. <sup>13</sup> And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one *of them* according to their deeds. <sup>14</sup> Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. <sup>15</sup> And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.**