

THE JUDGMENT AND THE HOLY CITY

Revelation 20:11-15; 21:1-7

In all classes mention should be made of why the Bible is called the Book of Life. It is easy to introduce this by reading the first verse of Genesis and then the first verse of Revelation 21, and finally verse 6. The teacher of each class—even the youngest—may well base his preparation of the lesson on a study of these three verses. All classes should learn that our church takes its name from Revelation 21:2.

Doctrinal Points

We are all writing our own “book of life” daily by the moral and spiritual decisions we make.

This “book of character” will determine our eternal state, either in heaven or hell.

With the aid of the heavenly doctrines, the Word can be for each of us an inexhaustible source of truth about the way and purpose of life.

Notes for Parents

There are two parts to the lesson for today, but they are very closely connected and both are very important. The picture of the judgment at the end of chapter 20 is a symbolic picture like all the parts of John’s vision. When we die, we do not actually appear before a throne and have all the actions of our lives reviewed. But the judgment is nonetheless real. The books which are opened are the character we have formed by our inner choices here on earth—we are writing this book every day. Here we can often cover up our real feelings and thoughts, but in the other world they can be plainly seen, and if we have not learned to be unselfish and to love the Lord and the neighbor, we shall choose of our own free will to turn our backs on the happy, unselfish sphere of heaven and go

with others like ourselves. The lake of fire is also a symbol—it is the burning of selfish passions, which makes the sphere of hell.

Chapter 20 tells us of the new heaven which the Lord created from the good—those in whose hearts was found the unselfish love which is the very heart of the Word of God. The holy city descending from God out of heaven is a new church on earth founded on the basis of the opened Word. It is on this basis that our church was founded when the Word was opened two hundred years ago, and so the name *Church of the New Jerusalem* was given to it. In its teachings we find all the blessings described in our reading, because the Word becomes to us the “fountain of the water of life,” an inexhaustible source of truth which enables us to understand the purpose of our life and to meet whatever hardships come to us as opportunities for spiritual development and progress.

Primary

The verses from each of the two chapters present a vivid picture which will appeal to the children. The emphasis should be on the books they are writing every day. The details of both parts of the vision should be impressed, and the reason why the creation of the new heaven immediately follows the judgment.

The apostle John had a wonderful vision of heaven. He saw the Lord—the same Lord Jesus whom he knew and loved—sitting on a throne with everyone bowing down before Him and singing praises to Him. And he saw in the Lord’s right hand the book, which we know as the Word of God, sealed with seven seals. And he was promised that the Lord would open the Word. This vision of John’s is described for us in the last book of the Bible, which is called the book of Revelation.

In the chapters which follow, the seals were opened one after another. As each one was opened, something new happened, each time more strange and terrible.

This is a picture of the judgment, in which deeper and deeper faults in our characters are searched out so that they may be destroyed.

At the beginning of our lesson for today, John again saw the great throne.

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Whom did he see standing before God?

The books which were opened were the lives of the people which they had lived while they were on earth.

The other book, the book of life, was the Word.

The people were judged to see how well they had learned and obeyed the laws which the Word teaches.

You are writing the book of your life every day, because everything you think and feel and do becomes part of you, and someday—just as in John’s vision—this book will be opened to see what you have written there and whether or not it agrees with the good and true things that are written in the Word of God. So you see that what you write in your book is very important.

It is very important for us to learn and do what the Lord wants us to do.

This is what we come to Sunday school to learn.

In chapter 21 what does John see coming down from God out of heaven?

Our church is named for this city.

It is a picture of heavenly character, and therefore of heaven itself.

How does the Lord assure us that we shall be happy there?

Junior

A brief review including some account of the nature of chapters 6-19 so that the judgment may be seen as a deeper and deeper examination of our motives and thoughts will be of use. The importance of going to the Word for our principles and of making the choice of good day by day should be stressed.

What did John see in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne?

What is this book?

With how many seals was it sealed?

By whom is it said the book would be opened?

Why is the Lord called the Lion?

Why is He called the Lamb?

John saw the setting for a great prophecy of judgment. This is followed by the story of how the seals of the book were opened one after another. As each seal was opened, something strange happened, and more and more terrible things took place until with the opening of the seventh seal great wars and destructions began. This is a picture of what happens when we really begin to look

deep into our hearts to see whether or not we love the Lord and the neighbor as the Word says we should.

Did you ever sit down and try to think just what made you do a particular thing? Let's take some good thing you did. Suppose you gave one of your friends something of yours which he liked. Offhand you would say you did it to make him happy. But were you really thinking of his happiness or of how he would thank you and admire you for your generosity and of how your mother would praise you when you told her about it? If such thoughts were in the back of your mind, there was really selfishness in your heart all the time.

We know that when we go into the other world, we shall no longer be able to hide our inmost thoughts and feelings. So now is the time for us to hunt out our selfishness and get rid of it. But this means a real struggle against temptation. It is this struggle which is pictured by the wars in the book of Revelation. Our natural selfishness is always trying to destroy the good in us and the Lord and the angels are fighting to destroy our selfishness.

In the first part of our lesson for today—the end of chapter 20—the final judgment is pictured, the time when we go into the spiritual world and see ourselves as we are, as just what we have made of ourselves in our life here.

What does John see again?

Who are standing before the throne?

How were the dead judged?

What happened to those who were not found “written in the book of life”?

It is not hard to understand that the book of life is the same book which has played so great a part in John's whole vision, the Word of God. And the other books are the books of our lives—our characters—which we have been forming day by day in this world. Those who are not found written in the book of life are those who have let themselves grow more and more selfish instead of trying to form their characters according to the teachings of the Word.

The “lake of fire” is a symbol picture like all the others. Are we happy when we are angry, or when we are hating someone, or

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when we are jealous, or when we are wanting something that belongs to someone else? These selfish loves are like fire burning inside us destroying all the happiness we might be having. The lake of fire is this burning of selfish desires which prevents the evil from ever being happy.

But those who have tried to learn and do the Lord's will and to overcome their selfishness have a very different future ahead of them. Chapters 21 and 22 tell about this future. We are studying today only the first few verses of chapter 21. The new heaven and new earth which John saw are an entirely new state of happiness in our hearts and minds and in our outward lives. Do you remember the first verse of the first chapter of the Bible? That tells us that the Lord made us with both a higher and a lower nature, and now we find that if we are good, in heaven we shall still have a higher and a lower nature, but both will be made new. Heaven is a place where everyone loves the Lord and the neighbor and no one is thinking of himself. So everyone is always happy inside and out. What did John see coming down from God out of heaven? What was the name of this city?

Our church takes this name because it stands for a new knowledge of what our lives ought to be, a knowledge which the Lord made available when He opened the Word and enabled Emanuel Swedenborg to write down for us truths which had been hidden within its letter. You have learned some of these deeper truths already, and you will learn more and more as you grow older. And if you continue to try to live according to all you learn, when you go into the other world you will be able to live in heaven, which is pictured by entering the holy city. Read the last verse of chapter 21 and also verse 14 of chapter 22.

In verse 6 what does the Lord call Himself?

What does He promise to give to him that is athirst?

Alpha and *omega* are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet; so the Lord is saying that He is the beginning of everything and also the end or object toward which everything in creation looks. Do you remember the fourth blessing? If not, look up Matthew

5:6. Then look up John 4:13-14. The water of life is truth from the Lord. The Lord gives us this truth freely in His Word, and everyone who really thirsts for it will find all he needs there.

Read verse 7 and look up Matthew 25:34 and John 1:12 and 3:3. We know that we inherit many things from our parents and through them from our forefathers. Sometimes when you do something from this inheritance, you may hear someone say: “He’s his father’s own son.” But the Lord is our heavenly Father. And the whole object of our life in this world is to overcome the many bad tendencies which we inherit from our earthly ancestors and to form our characters into the image and likeness of God; that is, to try to be as much like our heavenly Father as possible. This is to become *regenerate*, which means *reborn*, and so to become true sons of God.

Intermediate

The correspondence of the reading throughout will furnish plenty of material for the lesson. The Second Coming of the Lord should be identified with the opening of the seals, and the descent of the holy city with the beginning of the New Church.

The last book in the Bible, the book of Revelation, is, as we have seen, a prophecy of what would happen to the first Christian Church which the apostles founded. Evils and false ideas crept into it very soon. The greater part of the book is a symbol picture of the conflict that went on between good and evil and between truth and falsity, and the destruction which evil and falsity brought about in men’s souls. A revelation means literally an unveiling. In this world we can to some extent veil or cover up the bad things that are in us by putting on a pleasant exterior. But when we come into the other world, our real character comes to view. And we make our character here. We cannot change it after we die.

In our lesson for today we are given a symbol picture of what finally happened in the other world when the Lord made His Second Coming two hundred years ago. All the people, good and

bad, from the Christian Church had been living together in the other world much as they had lived in this world, waiting for the final judgment, which could not take place until the Lord had opened the Word. This is because it is the divine truth within the Word with which our characters have to be compared before good and evil can properly be separated. You can see how this is if you stop to think that a person can keep all the commandments in their literal meaning and yet not be a good person. For example, one may never actually kill anyone, but all the time one may want to murder but be held back only by fear of the law. The Lord, when He was in the world, showed men enough of this inner meaning of the commandments so that they could, if they wanted to, see and fight against their real evils. Read Matthew 5:21-22.

The character which we form for ourselves while we are in this world is the book which we take with us into the spiritual world. We are writing this book today and every day. If day by day we choose to try to do right—to learn and do what the Lord wants us to do—our book when it is opened in the other world will read like the book of life, the book which was in the hand of Him who sat on the throne in John’s vision. This is what is meant by being found written in the book of life. In other places it is said that one’s name is written in the book of life. In the Word a “name” means the *quality* of a person or thing. If, instead of this, we have chosen to go through life trying to get our own way, and merely putting on an orderly outward life because we could see that that would be more to our own advantage, then our names will not be found written in the book of life. The lake of fire into which the evil were cast in John’s vision is a picture of hell, where people because they care only for themselves are constantly “burned up” with jealousy, covetousness, revenge, and hatred. Whenever you are tempted to say about something someone else has done, “That burns me up,” stop and look into your heart and see if it is not really love of yourself and of having your own way that is the real fire you are feeling.

In chapter 21, the first heaven and the first earth refer to the

state of life in which the Christians in the spiritual world were before the Second Coming and their final judgment. The new heaven and the new earth are the true Christian heaven which was formed of the good after the judgment; the heaven is their inner state and the earth their outer state.

Then we come to John's vision of the holy city, New Jerusalem, descending from God out of heaven. A city in the Word is the symbol of doctrine. Doctrine is another word for teaching, and a city pictures the system of teaching which one has accepted and in which he lives. The city of Jerusalem always pictures the church as to its doctrine. So the New Jerusalem is the church which has a new doctrine in which it lives. It is the New Church, and that is why the true name of the New Church is *the Church of the New Jerusalem*. Verses 3 and 4 of chapter 20 tell us the great blessings which the Lord can give to those who really choose to live in this new city of doctrine. We may know who God really is, our Lord Jesus Christ, and know that He is always present with us and caring for us. And, although we have the same problems and difficulties and disappointments and bereavements which others have, they will not make us doubtful or afraid or unhappy, because we shall understand them and why they are permitted to come to us. The Lord gives us the water of life freely, divine truth which leads to heaven. To be sons of God means to be regenerated or born again, by overcoming the selfish and evil tendencies which we inherit from our human ancestry and cultivating the unselfish love for the Lord and the neighbor which is our inheritance from our heavenly Father.

Basic Correspondences

- name = quality
- the "lake of fire" = the burning of self-love in the heart,
which is hell
- city = doctrine
- Jerusalem = the church as to doctrine
- fountain of the water of life = the Word



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Senior

This lesson furnishes one of our best opportunities for discussing with young people the New Church, its basis and mission, and what our privilege and responsibilities as New Churchmen are.

The Bible begins with the words “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.” And in our lesson for today we find that the first verse of the next to the last chapter in the Bible says, “And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away.” The Word in its letter is a tremendous drama treating of the life of man from his first creation through his spiritual decline until, with the coming of the Lord, his progress in self-destruction was checked and his course again turned toward heaven; and the book of Revelation in prophecy completes his course to the final separation of the good and the evil in the last judgment and the establishment of permanent Christian heavens through which divine truth can always flow to men on earth.

In the first few verses which we have for our lesson today the judgment takes place and in the rest of our lesson the new heaven and earth are established and from them a new church descends to the earth of this world. You perhaps remember from the account of creation that heaven and earth represent the internal and the external of man and that in the beginning they were both empty and dark, just as every person is born with both heavenly and earthly possibilities but with no knowledge or understanding. The new heavens and the new earth represent the fulfillment of the high possibilities of man both internal and external.

The simple picture of judgment is symbolic like all the rest of the book of Revelation. Swedenborg makes it clear that when we enter the spiritual world, we shall not find ourselves standing before a throne on which the Lord sits to judge us; neither will the Lord arbitrarily condemn us to hell or invite us into heaven. The throne, as we have already seen, is a symbol of judgment; the book of life is the Word; and the books that are opened are our inner characters, which we have been forming by our choices of good or evil

day by day throughout our lives in this world. To have one's name written in the book of life is to find that one's inner character is in accordance with the teachings of the Word; that is, that one's ruling motives are love to the Lord and to the neighbor. This is the very sphere of heaven. If, when we enter the other world we are not in love to the Lord and the neighbor, we shall not choose to live in that sphere. Our judgment there is executed by our own free choice, as we gradually put off whatever disguises we may have been wearing to cover our real feelings and thoughts in this world, and show ourselves as we really are. The lake of fire mentioned in chapter 20:14-15 is indeed hell, but it is a symbolic picture of the company of all those who burn with hatred against everyone who does not serve them. The ruling love which makes hell is the love of self.

We know that the name of our church is *the Church of the New Jerusalem*, and that this name is taken from Revelation 21:2. A city always represents doctrine. Everyone lives in some city of doctrine, some system of thought and principle. The things he believes are the walls which limit his action and which shut out those he considers his enemies. If the things he believes are false, he is cut off from much that he might do and enjoy, and those who are shut out are those who would actually be his best friends. But if the things he believes are divine truth, he is prevented only from doing harmful things and he is protected from all his spiritual enemies. The city of Jerusalem throughout the Word is the symbol of the church as to doctrine, and the New Jerusalem is the church based on the new doctrine revealed to men by the Lord when He made His Second Coming in the opening of the Word. In *True Christian Religion*, n. 791, at the end of the chapter on the New Heaven and the New Church, Swedenborg says: "After this work was finished the Lord called together His twelve disciples who followed Him in the world; and the next day sent them all forth throughout the whole spiritual world to preach the Gospel that *the Lord God Jesus Christ* reigns . . . This took place on the nineteenth day of June, 1770." So we call June 19 "New Church Day."

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What the Lord gave to men in His Second Coming is described in the remaining verses of our lesson. The opened Word helps us to see that the Lord Jesus Christ glorified is indeed the one God of heaven and earth, “the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end.” It makes us realize that He is present with us and caring for us all the time. It removes all our doubts and fears and makes our griefs and disappointments easy to bear. The opened Word is to us “the fountain of the water of life” from which the Lord satisfies all our thirst for truth.

Adult

Here also the best discussion material is in the nature and mission of the New Church, although some of the younger and newer members may need to be given a clear understanding of how judgment takes place.

The middle chapters in the book of Revelation are a symbolic description of what happens in the church and in individual lives when the seals which have closed the inner meaning of the Word are opened one by one, bringing deeper and deeper truths to bear in the examination of the state of the church and of the individual heart. In this process the conflict between good and evil—between the forces of the Lord and the powers of the hells—increases, and the devastation becomes more and more extensive. If we are really examining ourselves in the light of the Word, we must go the whole way; we cannot take just the instruction we are willing to obey and ignore the rest.

The more one learns of the internal meaning of the Word, the more deeply it searches the mind and heart. It holds up high standards of spiritual thought and life, often diametrically opposed to common precept and practice. It never allows us to rest satisfied with ourselves, because when one temptation is overcome, a deeper one is always revealed to us. This is what is pictured by the fact that with the opening of each seal the devastation increased.

But the whole scene of conflict in the Apocalypse leads to final victory. Self-satisfaction is the badge of spiritual failure. Only those

evils which we see and struggle against are overcome; the rest remain in us and limit our uses to eternity. We admire a person who wants to “die in harness.” We cannot always succeed in this desire in our material occupations; physical age and weakness may prevent. But the soul does not grow old and weak with the body; it passes—if we are regenerating—“from strength to strength.” We should wish to die in spiritual harness, to fight to the end against the evils and falsities within us, and against evil and falsity in the world. So long as the Lord permits us to remain in this world, we may be sure that there is still something for us to do in the way of spiritual progress, and we shall find the way to that something if we continue to read and study the opened Word, which will lead us daily to new conflicts, new victories, and fuller life.

But there can be no reservations, no halfhearted allegiance. The forces which oppose the work of the opened Word in the church and in us are pictured as the dragon—“that old serpent” who tempted Eve in the garden—and the beast, selfish and sensual desires in the heart and false ideas in the mind. These must be recognized and rejected little by little, day by day to the very end of life. The book of Revelation is given to show us these forces in their true aspect.

The last verses of the twentieth chapter sum up in brief and simple form the final judgment. Many people over the centuries have taken them literally, expecting to remain in their graves until some final day and then to be raised up and brought before a throne on which the Lord would be seated to judge them. And they have thought of the books as a record kept in heaven of all their acts, which would then be opened and read out. The writings give us a very different understanding of this scene. There is no need for anyone else to keep a record of our acts. We keep that record ourselves. For everything we do or think or feel affects us and goes into the formation of our character, and everything we choose freely, of good or evil, is written on our hearts. The character which we ourselves have formed by our free choices from day to day in this world is our “book” which will be opened when we

pass into the spiritual world, not in any single judgment scene, but gradually, as we put off the external considerations which have restrained us in this world from giving full expression to what we really feel and think.

We shall judge ourselves by choosing in perfect freedom the kind of life which we have formed in our inner selves. Read Revelation 13:8, 3:4-5, and 2:17. We know that in the Word the name of anything always signifies its quality. Our names will be found written in the book of life if our inmost quality is found to be in accord with the divine truth of the Word. In that case our sphere will be the sphere of heaven where all live in love to the Lord and in mutual love for each other and no one wishes to exalt himself or to be served. If we are not so written in the book of life, if our final quality proves to be centered in self, our chosen sphere will be the sphere of hell, where all burn with the desire to exalt themselves and to be served by others. This is the “lake of fire.”

We are all very familiar with chapters 21 and 22. The book of Revelation has well been called “the charter of the New Church.” The formation of the new heaven and new earth and the descent of the holy city, New Jerusalem, are described as immediately following the opening of the books and the final judgment. The first verse of Genesis declares, “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.” The ultimate result of this creation, desired and foreseen by the Lord from the beginning, is “a new heaven and a new earth.” All the history of man as a race and as an individual lies between. In verse 6 of our chapter we read, “And he said unto me, It is done. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end.” In TCR 791, at the end of the section on the New Heaven and the New Church, we read: “After this work was finished the Lord called together His twelve disciples who followed Him in the world; and the next day sent them all forth throughout the whole spiritual world to preach the Gospel that *the Lord God Jesus Christ* reigns, whose kingdom shall be for ages and ages, according to the prediction in Daniel (7:13, 14) and in the Apocalypse (9:15) . . . This took place on the nineteenth day of June,

1770.” This is the only specific date so mentioned in the writings and we have every reason to observe June 19 as “New Church Day.”

In AR 879 we read: “*And I John saw the holy city New Jerusalem coming down from God out of heaven*, signifies the New Church to be established by the Lord at the end of the former church, which will be consociated with the New Heaven in Divine truths as to doctrine and as to life.” This should make us think very seriously about the basis of our New Church organization and its mission in the world. The new heaven is established in the spiritual world. It is the only Christian heaven there is and it is the eventual home of all the good—whatever their religion may have been in this world—but all the good people are not by virtue of their goodness members of the Lord’s New Church on earth, because the New Church on earth must be “consociated with the New Heaven *in Divine truths* as to doctrine and as to life.” Without good of life there is no church, but without true doctrine also there is no New Church.

The Lord said to His disciples (John 15:16): “Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you.” He says the same to us in this new age. Is this an excuse for self-exaltation? Peter denied the Lord. Judas betrayed Him. Any one of us may and frequently does do the same. We deny and betray Him when we turn our backs on the truths which He has entrusted to us for the world’s enlightenment—the Gospel He has given us to preach—and by all our failures to live these truths. “I have chosen you,” He says, “and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain.”

From the Writings of Swedenborg

Apocalypse Revealed, n. 876: “*And I saw a New Heaven and a New Earth*, signified that a New Heaven was formed from Christians by the Lord, which at this day is called the Christian heaven, where they are who had worshipped the Lord and had lived according to His Commandments in the Word, in whom therefore there is charity and faith: in which heaven also are all the infants of Christians. By ‘a New Heaven and a New Earth,’ is not meant the

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natural heaven visible to the eyes, nor the natural earth inhabited by men, but the spiritual heaven are meant, and the earth belonging to that heaven, where the angels are . . . It is called the Christian heaven, because it is distinct from the ancient heavens, which existed from the men of the church before the Lord's coming. These ancient heavens are above the Christian heaven; for the heavens are like expanses, one above another; it is the same with each particular heaven; for each heaven by itself is distinguished into three heavens, an inmost or third, a middle or second, and a lowest or first, and so it is with this New Heaven."

Apocalypse Revealed, n. 879: "And I John saw the holy city New Jerusalem coming down from God out of heaven, signifies the New Church to be established by the Lord at the end of the former church, which will be consociated with the New Heaven in Divine truths as to doctrine and as to life . . . it is said 'to come down from God out of heaven,' because it descends from the Lord through the New Christian heaven . . . for the church on earth is formed through heaven by the Lord, that they may act as one and be consociated."

Apocalypse Revealed, n. 881: "Prepared as a Bride adorned for her Husband, signifies that church conjoined with the Lord through the Word . . . By 'prepared' is signified clothed for her betrothal, and the church is no otherwise attired for her betrothal, and afterwards for conjunction or marriage, than by the Word; for this is the only means of conjunction or marriage, because the Word is from the Lord and concerning the Lord, and thus the Lord; for which reason it is also called 'a covenant,' and 'a covenant' signifies spiritual conjunction; the Word also was given for this end. That by 'Husband' is meant the Lord is plain from verses 9 and 10 of this chapter, where Jerusalem is called 'the Bride the Lamb's Wife.'"

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- P. What was the book which John saw in the right hand of the Lord?
the Word
- P. With how many seals was it sealed? *seven*
- J. Who was to open the book? *the Lord*
- J. In our lesson today who are standing before the throne? *the dead*
- I. What are the "books" which are opened? *individual character*
- I. How are the dead judged? *by the degree of love to the Lord and the neighbor*
- J. What happened to those who were not found written in the book of life?
cast into lake of fire

- J. At the beginning of the next chapter, what does John see? *new heaven, new earth*
- P. Where in the Bible did we first hear of the heaven and the earth? *Genesis 1*
- P. What does John see coming down from God out of heaven? *holy city*
- P. What is the name of the city? *New Jerusalem*
- J. Why is this name so familiar to us? *name of our church*
- J. What are some of the blessings people find in this city? *no tears, pain, death*
- J. What does the Lord call Himself? *Alpha and omega*
- J. What are *Alpha* and *omega*? *first and last letters of Greek alphabet*
- J. What does the Lord promise? *water of life*
- I. What kind of thirst is He speaking about? *for truth*
- S. What is the “fountain of the water of life”? *divine truth in the Word*
- S. What is meant by becoming a son of God? *developing in the image and likeness of God*