“Guilty!” – Great White Throne and Hell (Rev. 20:11-15)

**Introduction:** Some bystanders picked up an unconscious driver after a crash. They were carrying him to a nearby gas station. Upon opening his eyes, he began to kick and struggle frantically. Afterwards, he explained that the first thing he saw was a "Shell" sign, and somebody was standing in front of the "S"!

That is the only humor you will hear from me today. We come to a serious subject. We’re going to be talking about Hell.

Let’s start with some assumptions. Hell is real. It’s a place of unending, unbearable, conscious suffering. If it’s not real, you don’t need to be here.

On an American troopship, the soldiers crowded around their chaplain asking, "Do you believe in Hell?" "I do not." "Well, then will you please resign, for if there is no Hell, we do not need you, and if there is a Hell, we do not wish to be led astray."

Many have attempted to explain away the concept of Hell by saying the Bible doesn’t present it as a place of eternal suffering and punishment.[[1]](#endnote-1) I’m not going to spend our time here today trying to convince you that Hell exists. I can direct you to some resources that will persuade you.[[2]](#endnote-2) I simply want to examine with you a small portion of what Scripture says about Hell and then get you to ask a question. Since Hell is a real place of eternal suffering, am I willing to do whatever it takes to make sure I and everyone I encounter will not go there?

The second assumption is none of us, including me, wants to talk about the subject of final judgment. There are some who seem to enjoy this subject and are glad people are going there. I’m not one. Jesus wasn’t one either. He didn’t like talking about Hell, but He did talk about it – multiple times.

About the only reason most of us do anything we don’t enjoy doing is because it’s necessary. What we’re going to do here today *is necessary*! You need to know what’s coming both for your benefit and for the benefit of the people you pass every day. You say, “How could this topic benefit me? I’m not going to Hell!”

I can think of at least three benefits to this discussion. One, an understanding of Hell should cause you to evaluate your salvation. The Bible says to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12). My goal here is not to scare anyone into doubting their salvation, but to motivate you to make sure of it. Two, allow this examination to promote overwhelming thankfulness for the grace and mercy of God poured out on you. *THANK GOD* you’re not going there! How dare you complain knowing what God has rescued you from? Third, you encounter people every day who do not have a relationship with Jesus. *Yes*, you *are* your brother’s keeper (Gen. 4:9). You have a God-given responsibility to be a Watchman – to be a love-filled disciple of Jesus Christ and warn people of impending judgment. If their house were on fire, you’d tell them, wouldn’t you?

My task here today is to show you the fire and enable you to hear the screams. My prayer then is you won’t run from here to the restaurant but to your neighbor and co-worker and friend and tell them of the available rescue by Jesus.

1. **The Judge is God, and He is awesome!** (Rev. 20:11)

We use the word “awesome” to describe wonderful things. “I had an *awesome* vacation!” “My wife is *awesome*!” “My pastor preached an *awesome* message today!” We say, “God is awesome” meaning He is wonderful, and He is. He is loving and kind and merciful. He hears our prayers. He provides for our needs. He gives us peace and joy. He forgave our sins. He’s preparing a beautiful home for us, and He’s coming back to take us there. All wonderful. But the word “awesome” doesn’t mean wonderful.

Awesome means “inspiring an overwhelming feeling of reverence, admiration, or fear.”[[3]](#endnote-3) Rev. 20:11 doesn’t present a wonderful scene; it describes a frightening setting.

John sees one piece of furniture. He calls it “great.” It’s large, impressive, and inescapable. It’s white. It’s clean and pure. The One sitting on it is the *standard* of clean and pure.

White is a pretty common color in Heaven. The angels wear white (Matt. 28:3), the saints eventually will (Rev. 19:14), and Jesus wore white on the Mount of Transfiguration (Mark 9:3). Even the horses in Heaven are white (Rev. 19:11). I get the idea that God likes white.

You’ve probably noticed that something can appear to be white until you put it up against something that is whiter. Maybe you’ve done that with clothing. After you’ve worn and washed a garment several times, it appears white *to you*. But then when you purchase something white and compare the two, you discover how dingy the used garment has become.

The wall looked white until you started applying the new coat of paint. When you saw the picture of you and your girlfriends, you were embarrassed to see your teeth in comparison to theirs. All of those are fixable issues.

The participants’ lack of “whiteness” will not be fixable when they stand before the throne. Previously, they had judged their “whiteness” in comparison to other people, how far they’d come (“If you’d seen me ten years ago…), or the expectations of their environment. There is only one standard of white. He’s the One sitting on the throne. And from the reaction of Creation to His presence, it doesn’t look like He’s in a good mood. Why would Creation run from and try to hide from God?

Did you ever try to hide from your parents? I’m not talking about when you were playing Hide-and-Seek. I’m talking about when you were in trouble. Playtime was over. You knew the school called your dad at work and interrupted an important meeting to inform him about your behavior. You loved your dad, and you knew your dad loved you. You also knew that His expectations were high. You were his child. You bore his likeness and his name. He would often remind you that your actions reflected on the family. Now, you had done something that shamed the family. Dad knew how to express love. But he also could express awful anger. When dad was angry, you didn’t make excuses. You didn’t speak unless he asked you a question. It was time to shut up and take whatever punishment he gave.

There’s a reason Jesus told us to refer to God as our Father. He loves us. He wants us in His presence. He gave His good Son to redeem His bad ones. He disciplines us and beckons us to learn from Him. Sadly, the good Father is also just. The Father, through His Word, commands us repeatedly to fear Him and obey Him.

*“So the LORD commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God for our good always and for our survival, as it is today.”* (Deut. 6:24)

*“The fear of the LORD prolongs life, but the years of the wicked will be shortened.”* (Prov. 10:27)

For those incorrigible rebels who spurn His discipline and His entreaty, God will not act in His fatherly role. He will be their Judge.

God is awesome, and this day will be an awful day.

1. **The judged are people, and they are doomed!** (Rev. 20:12-13)

John says God will judge dead people. You may not recognize it now, but those words should be an encouragement to you. They mean that no Christians will be there. We’re not dead.

*“Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, … Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.”* (Romans 6:8-11)

*“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears my word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life.”* (John 5:24)

Jesus said those who took part in the first resurrection don’t have to fear the second death (Rev. 20:6). We already died vicariously in Jesus (Gal. 2:20) and were born again (John 3:3; 2 Cor. 5:17). Here’s God’s accounting system: born once, die twice. Born twice, die once.

Don’t get me wrong. God *will* judge you. Your judgment at the Judgment Seat of Christ will be an awesome day too. There will be tears at both judgments. God will wipe away yours. *They* will cry theirs for eternity in Hell.

Some people hear a statement like that and are offended. “How could a God who claims to be loving send anyone to Hell? Haven’t they already experienced enough Hell on earth? If I were God, I wouldn’t send anyone to Hell.” By so doing, people audaciously judge the Judge. The clay attempts to correct the Potter (Rom. 9:20-24). You can argue your innocence and the injustice of your punishment’s severity for the rest of eternity, but it won’t change anything. You are not the Judge because you are not God.

If you *were* God, you wouldn’t have left Heaven behind to become a baby, live a sinless life, and heal thankless people. You wouldn’t have allowed them to nail you to a rugged cross, and you certainly wouldn’t have forgiven them as they did it. You wouldn’t have risen from the dead and spent the next 40 days commissioning fearful, traitorous disciples. And you wouldn’t be preparing even now to take them as your Bride and live with them forever. Now, aren’t you glad you’re not God? I surely am.

God is merciful, and God is gracious. God is also just. That’s why He sent Jesus. Someone had to pay the penalty. We couldn’t pay it without going to Hell, so Jesus took our penalty (Rom. 5:8). In Jesus, God’s mercy and God’s justice meet. God requires justice and mercy from us (Micah 6:8) because doing so makes us like Him. If you reject God’s offer of mercy in Jesus, then the Judge, as much as it pains Him to do so, has to pour out your just penalty on you.

People don’t have the right to judge God, but God has the right to judge people – all of them. He created them. He had works He planned for them to do (Eph. 2:10). But they didn’t do what He planned because they didn’t respond to His invitation. They had a choice then. They have *no choice* now. He calls their bodies to rise up from their place of decay. They come. He calls them to leave behind their important phone calls and all their plans for the future. They come. He calls them to leave behind all they accumulated, all that held them back from responding to His original call. Great and small, they come.

John doesn’t tell us here how God determines the “greatness” and “smallness” of the participants. Is it “big” sinners and “little” sinners? For some, their sin was so voluminous and public, even the citizens of earth reviled them. Others were closet sinners. No one noticed them. They faced no judgment on earth. Their sin was large but private – child pornography, embezzlement, fraud. Is it “well-known” sinners and “anonymous” sinners – not because of the nature of their sin but because of their status on earth? Some were powerful and influential. Others, known only by a name badge, begrudgingly served their customers and cashed their paycheck. They weren’t bad; they just weren’t good – at least, not by God’s standards (Isaiah 64:6).

What they accomplished and who they were on earth won’t matter anymore. God will judge everyone, no matter their level of greatness on earth. And He will judge them evenhandedly.

1. **The judgment is fair and based on irrefutable evidence**.
2. What they did with Jesus – *“Book of Life”*

There are two bases God will use to evaluate each person. Everyone will be judged based on these two standards alone. The first is how they responded to Jesus’ offer of forgiveness.

There is a book in heaven called the Book of Life. It records the name of every person who places their faith in Jesus Christ as Savior. When you said “yes” to Jesus’ request to come into your life, it guaranteed that He would say “yes” to your request for entrance into His home. You became God’s child.

*“He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name.”* (John 1:11-12)

Maybe you’re still trying to be God’s judge. “Why doesn’t God let everyone into heaven? From what I understand, it’s got plenty of room.” The Bible is awfully clear that not everyone will get to be there.

*“Outside are the dogs and the sorcerers and the immoral persons and the murderers and the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices lying.”* (Rev. 22:15)

Before you go judging God, let me ask you a question. Who do you allow into your home? Oh, you may invite guests in from time to time. Friends come over for a meal. Out of town relatives might even be allowed to stay through the holidays. But eventually, hopefully, they go home. The only ones who get to stay permanently are your immediate family. That’s who gets to stay in God’s home – His children. God lists their names in the book.

Why even open this book? The people at the Great White Throne are not Christians. Their presence at this judgment already establishes they do not have a relationship with Jesus. *But they might not know that*.

Can you envision the fearful faces as people awaken from their deathly slumber? For some of them, they’re not surprised by their surroundings. They knew this day was coming. For others, they expected to awaken in Heaven. They planned to worship at the throne, not be judged in front of it. They’re panic-stricken. When it comes time for God to judge them, they haltingly ask, “Can you check the book again? Maybe the angel made a mistake God.” The Bible says that there will be “many” who mistakenly think their name is in the Book.

*“Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you who practice lawlessness.'”* (Matt. 7:22-23)

What if the book also records all the opportunities you had to respond to Jesus? The Bible doesn’t say the Book of Life records your number of opportunities, but they *are* recorded. They will be part of the basis for your judgment.

*“Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had been performed in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You will be brought down to Hades!”* (Luke 10:13-15)

*“But the one who did not know it, and committed deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few. From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more.”* (Luke 12:48)

The implication is that God is keeping a record of how much access you have to the Good News of Jesus. The greater the access, the greater the penalty when you reject it. Many if not most of you have had access to the Gospel your whole life. What have you done with it?

What about those who never heard the good news about Jesus? They didn’t have an opportunity! That can’t be fair! It might not be fair, but their punishment will be just. God says even they are “without excuse” (Rom. 1:20).

You can rage at God all you want for making the door so narrow. Or you can thank Him for making a door at all.

Just in case you missed it at the beginning. Let me say it again. *I’m not happy about any of this*. The existence of Hell causes vulcanous upheaval in my soul. If I had an enemy, I wouldn’t want him to go to this place. The reason I’m sharing all this with you is because I don’t want you to go there, and I don’t even like all of you. I wish everyone would respond to Jesus in faith, see their sins forgiven, and have the privilege of enjoying the pleasures of Heaven forever. That’s not going to happen.

*“Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.”* (Matthew 7:13-14)

The Book is opened. God checks the names. People discover their fate. The first book establishes beyond any doubt where they’re going. They have a reservation in Hell.

1. What they did with others – *“according to their deeds”; (Matt. 25:41-46)*

Other books are then opened. The records in the second set of books determine the punishment’s severity when they get there. It is vital that you understand the difference between the content and purpose of the two books. No one goes to Heaven because they’ve been good. No one goes to Hell because they’ve been bad. Our destination is determined by what we do with Jesus. The *quality* of our existence after we get to our destination is determined at least partially by what we did with what God gave us.

From a purely human perspective, some people are “gooder” than others. Though our actions have no impact on our destination, they do impact the magnitude of our consequences. The Antichrist will have a more severe penalty than the philanthropist. We’ve already noted that some people have greater opportunities than others. European and North American countries have had greater access to the Gospel for a longer period than any other group of nations in history. Churches litter the landscape. The internet and television take their message directly into the home. The judgment for those living in these areas will be more severe than nations in the Middle and the Far East where the government restricts access to the Gospel. I hesitate to say that because some of you will misunderstand me. So let me be clear.

Hell is suffering – excruciating suffering – regardless of your place there. There will be no area in Hell where an air conditioner would almost make it bearable. No one will be pining for a Pina Colada to wet their lips. We haven’t even begun to describe the specific suffering in Hell. You already know one source of suffering there – fire. Whether the fire is 300 degrees or 3000, it still burns. And it will burn forever.

1. **The judgment is final and without mercy**. (20:14-15)

Some believe Hell is temporary. This belief can take one of two forms. Either they believe people are annihilated by the fire (they’re burned up, they cease to exist), or they believe people suffer in Hell for a period and then go on to Heaven. You may have heard of purgatory – a place to finish paying for your sins. *I wish Hell were temporary*. It is not. The same terminology used to describe the duration of suffering in Hell is also used to describe the duration of ecstasy in Heaven. However long one exists, so does the other. We want pleasure to last forever. We want suffering to be over as quickly as possible, especially the type of suffering in Hell.

There will be three types of suffering. The first type will be physical suffering. This is the type that gets the most attention and the most ridicule. Jesus said there will be fire there.

*“So just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”* (Matt. 13:40-42)

If Jesus did not mean literal fire, He could have used other terminology to describe Hell’s physical suffering, but He didn’t. “Wouldn’t people just eventually burn up?” Do you remember the bush in the wilderness? It caught Moses’ attention because though it was on fire, it didn’t’ burn up. If God can do that with a bush, He can do that with a body.

There will be other manifestations of physical suffering. Hunger and thirst. No sleep or rest (Rev. 14:11). We can usually endure torment if there is an end in sight, even if that end is death. Those in this place are already dead. There will be no end.

There will also be emotional suffering. *Boredom*, sheer boredom. Any student knows their greatest desire – summer vacation – becomes their greatest Hell when they have nothing to do. The prisoner in solitary knows it too. So do you when you happen to be in an area where there is no access to the internet. How good of a signal do you think you’ll get in Hell? *Regrets*. “Why didn’t I listen to my parents or the pastor?” *Loneliness*. Yes, there will be many other people there. You will all be suffering together. On earth, suffering produces intimacy because it draws us together. It creates compassion. Not here. Compassion comes from God, and no one will be able to feel His presence here. Besides, have you ever been in a room *full* of people and felt utterly alone? I have. Anxiety fills your heart as you come to the awareness that others you know and love will be arriving shortly. You don’t want them to experience this Hell. *Darkness* – utter darkness – and the fear it produces. “Wait a minute. Didn’t you just say there would be fire? Fire produces light. How can there be fire *and* darkness?”

Are there any firemen in the house? Have you ever had difficulty finding someone who was trapped in a burning building? That doesn’t make sense to me. I would think all that fire would light up the place and make it easy to find your way around and spot anyone who needed rescuing. Oh, the smoke makes it virtually impossible to see. Besides, God created fire and gave it all its qualities. He was the one Who decided fire should produce light. If He created a type of fire that emits light, don’t you think He could create some that doesn’t?

You’ve probably heard of those who claim Hell will be the greatest blast ever. “I’m going to party with all my friends! We’ll all be there! Hell is Heaven for us since God won’t be there.” But you know different. Everything good comes from God. Love. Joy. Peace. Satisfaction in your work (Eccl. 3:13; 5:19). Even music comes from God. The longest book in the Bible (Psalms) is a book of songs. There will be singing in heaven (Rev. 5:9; 14:3; 15:3) but not in Hell. How long can you go without music?

The worst type of suffering though will be spiritual. They will be separated from God and His people forever. At first, separation from God and His children sounds pretty good to some. No more judging. No more restrictions. No one telling me what to do. I’m finally my own boss. “Better to reign in Hell than to serve in Heaven.”[[4]](#endnote-4) Humanity has been demanding for millennia that God stop interfering. Hell is God giving them what they’ve been asking for. Since you’ve had God’s presence around you all your life, you’ve never fully experienced His absence. Be careful what you wish for.

God created you in His image. You were created to be *like* God. You were created to *need* God. You have a God-sized hole inside you; a hole only God can fill.

Some of you remember a toy you had as a child. Its purpose was to teach you your shapes, but it ended up only provoking frustration. Your parents presented you with this tray that had different cutouts – a star, a circle, a square and so on. Then they gave you shapes to put in the different slots. *And the war was on*. Do you remember working to make the square block fit in the hole shaped like a circle? This toy even came with a pretend hammer. Not sure how smart that was. But it certainly helped get out your frustrations! Having experienced that gives you a sampling of one of the torments of Hell.

You know there’s a hole inside you. You’ve been trying to fill it with relationships and accomplishments and entertainment. You’ve been trying to dull its ache with alcohol and drugs. You’ve been trying to drown out its call with music. Nothing works. Ask Solomon. He tried too. The wisest man ever used the best years of his life on substitutes for God. Stupid. After he finished experimenting, he came to these conclusions:

*“I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind.”* (Eccl. 1:14)

*“Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near when you will say, ‘I have no delight in them.’"* (Eccl. 12:1)

*“The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.”* (Eccl. 12:13-14)

“Emptiness of emptiness. All is emptiness.” Without God, it doesn’t matter what you have. It’s empty. Hell will be full of empty people.

I need to stop for a minute and correct something. Throughout this sermon, I’ve been using the term “Hell.” The more accurate term for these people’s eternal destination is the Lake of Fire. Think of it like this. Hell is jail. The Lake of Fire is prison. Whatever happens in jail happens in prison, but it’s usually more severe, and it lasts longer. People in our judicial system go to jail when they’ve been accused. They might later be found “not guilty” and be set free. Not here. You go to Hell because *you are guilty*. You won’t be getting out. Your only momentary reprieve is when you go before God at the Great White Throne Judgment for your sentencing hearing. Don’t hope for leniency or mercy. The time for God’s mercy is over.

The book of Lamentations records that God’s mercies are new every morning (Lam. 3:23). Jeremiah wrote Lamentations as God was pouring out His wrath on Israel. Jeremiah cried. God cried too. God also told Jeremiah a better day was coming. Israel would be coming back. There was still hope for her. While there is still hope, God pours out mercy.

Dante Alighieri wrote a long poem called “Dante’s Inferno” in which he described his vision of Hell. The Bible doesn’t support everything he envisioned. It does support the sentiment of this. Above Hell’s entrance, these words are written: “Abandon hope all ye who enter here.” No mercy. No hope.

**Conclusion:** We’ve just finished a small glimpse of judgment day and its consequences. How do you feel? Depressed? Sad? I do. This is a hard topic. It’s not just a topic for discussion, explanation, or even debate. It’s a topic about people and where they will spend eternity. The realization that people – billions of people – will spend eternity in this place with no hope of ever changing their situation is depressing.

Does it make you angry? “God has no right to send all those people who have never heard of Jesus to Hell simply because no one told them!” You should be angry, but not at God. Be angry with all those Christians over two millennia who chose to keep their mouth shut rather than speak up about Jesus. Be angry with the ones who choose to spend their money on their own comfort rather than using it to translate the Bible into the languages of the people. Be angry at them. But if you’re going to be angry at them, you need to recognize something. You’re one of them.

Maybe you’re scared. Be honest. Some of you like being scared. That’s why you watch horror movies. The difference between Hell and a movie is a movie lasts two hours. When it’s over, you can go back to your normal life. Hell lasts forever. A movie has actors and special effects; it’s not real. There are no special effects in Hell. The fire is real, and so are the screams.

Hell and movies have two things in common. They both require payment, and you can choose whether or not you go there. Unless you have committed to Jesus Christ, you’re already on the road to Hell. You’re one heartbeat away. You can change your destination. You can leave this place today assured that your name is in God’s book. Don’t pay for your own sins. Accept the payment Jesus already made. Place your faith in Him.

Sadly, some people hear a sermon like this, and it excites them. “I’m glad they’re going to get their just due finally! I’ve been waiting for justice my whole life. Get ‘em, God!” I hope you’re not one of these. God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. If you do, then you’d better be scared. Your attitude gives evidence that you are not a child of God. God doesn’t want to condemn people; He wants to rescue them!

There’s one more potential reaction. You’re motivated. That’s how Paul reacted to this reality. It compelled him to rescue others just as God had rescued him.

*“Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. He 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. 5:20-21)

*“…Behold, now is ‘the acceptable time,’ behold, now is ‘the day of salvation’.”* (2 Cor. 6:2)

People are dying and going to Hell! But they don’t have to. *You* don’t have to. Commit your life to Jesus Christ. Then help others do the same.

1. *Love Wins* by Rob Bell; published by Harper One, 2011 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Erasing Hell* by Francis Chan and Preston Sprinkle; published by David C. Cook, 2011 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Online dictionary [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. *Paradise Lost*, John Milton [↑](#endnote-ref-4)