

# When Christ Judges and Makes War

(An Overview of the Book of Revelation)

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If you've ever had to stand before a judge, you know that it can be one of the most harrowing experiences you can face. Several years ago I was asked to be a character witness in a very serious case and I can tell you that even though I was only there to offer my perspective, it was not a pleasant experience. Just before the judge rendered her verdict, she turned to me and said the following words: *"Pastor, I understand and believe everything that you said. I truly believe that the person standing before me has tried to turn her life around and to live a good and upstanding life. But I want this courtroom to know that I'm not here to judge this person's character, I'm here to determine whether this person is innocent or guilty."* Standing before a judge is definitely a traumatic experience! And it is no different when we come to the book we will consider in this session—the book of Revelation.

The book of Revelation is the awesome and majestic conclusion to both the New Testament and the entire canon of Scripture. It is a fascinating look at what the future and eternity have in store for those who believe in Christ and for those who do not. The Apostle John's primary purpose in writing it was to instruct and encourage believers in Christ through a presentation of Jesus in His role as Judge. Unlike any other book in the Bible, it magnifies Christ as the One to whom the Father has "committed all judgment" (John 5:22).

And that is what I would like us to focus on during our first session this afternoon—the Lord Jesus Christ in His role as Judge.

The book of Revelation begins by showing us what the Judge is like (chapter 1).

### **I. The Characteristics of the Judge (1)**

(This is the Judge portrayed in His own Person)

Chapter one contains a description of the Judge---His attributes. It gives us an idea of what he looks like spiritually. His suitability as the Judge.

**1:10-12**——I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day, and I heard behind me **a loud voice, as of a trumpet**,<sup>11</sup> saying, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last,” and, “What you see, write in a book and send *it* to the seven churches which are in Asia: to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamos, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea.”<sup>12</sup> Then I turned to see **the voice** that spoke with me.

John’s vision of Christ came to him on a Sunday, **the Lord’s day**. He **was in the Spirit**, literally, *came to be* in the Spirit, meaning “under the Spirit’s influence” (BDAG, p. 198), what we might call a waking dream. Apparently what happened is that John’s physical senses were supernaturally suspended while God’s Spirit was giving him the visions found throughout the book of Revelation.

Now the **voice** that commissioned John to write is so loud that he turns to **see** who is speaking with him. Even though you cannot “see” a voice, what is undoubtedly meant here is that John turned to see *the person* who was speaking to him. Having turned, John sees **seven golden lampstands** (representing the seven churches; cf. v 20), and Christ (**One like the Son of Man**) standing in the **midst** of the churches. The “voice” John

heard and turned to see was none other than a person—the Lord Jesus Christ—God’s ultimate and final *voice* to mankind (cf. Heb 1:2)!

It is extremely significant that the Messianic title “Son of Man” is used here in light of the fact that it is a title linked to Jesus in His role as judge. John 5:22 & 27 states: “...the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son...and has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is *the Son of Man*” (John 5:22, 27; emphasis added).

So in his vision of the Judge, the first thing we notice is His powerful and potent voice. To hear one syllable fall from His lips is to instantly recognize that this is the omnipotent “Judge of all the earth” (Gen 18:25).

Now, John continues (and as we read, remember that these symbols are telling us what the Judge is like):

**1:12b-16**———And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands, <sup>13</sup> and in the midst of the seven lampstands *One* like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band. <sup>14</sup> His head and hair *were* white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes like a flame of fire; <sup>15</sup> His feet *were* like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace, <sup>16</sup> He had in His right hand seven stars, out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword, and His countenance *was* like the sun shining in its strength.

John has just been given the Judge’s attributes in symbolical form. Like present-day judges whose long robes signify the dignity and honor of their positions, Jesus is **clothed with a garment down to the feet**. The fact that His robe is **girded** indicates the Judge is prepared for action (cf. Eph 6:14; Luke 12:37), the **golden band** probably foreshadowing His judgment via the golden-banded angels possessing the seven bowls of wrath (cf. 15:6-7). Now like His Father—the “Ancient of Days”—in Daniel 7:9, the Son

is also an eternally pre-existent person whose longevity is symbolized by **hair as white as snow**. **Eyes like a flame of fire** point to the Judge’s piercing examination and judgment of both the saved (cf. 2:18, 23) and the lost (cf. 19:12). **Feet** that glow like metal **refined in a furnace** point to the Judge’s activity—the fact that He “walks” in the midst of His churches (cf. 2:1) and is active in purifying and chastening His people. And as we see later in chapter 14, those same feet of glowing brass will also trample the lost in the winepress of God’s wrath (cf. 14:19-20). The **voice as the sound of many waters** manifests the power and majesty of the Judge’s decrees (cf. Ezek 43:2; Ps 29). The basis upon and the means by which His judgments are carried out is His Word, the **sharp two-edged sword** from His mouth (cf. Heb 4:12; Rev 2:16; 19:15, 21). His face is **like the sun shining in its strength**. Just as the *physical* sun lights the earth and everyone on it, so does Christ in a *spiritual* sense. Think back to John 8:1-11—the story of the woman taken in adultery. What do we see there? What we see is the Lord Jesus Christ—the divine Judge—driving the adulterous woman’s accusers away because He has implicitly exposed them. Then immediately afterward in 8:12 He calls Himself “the light of the world” for the first time (which is a reference to the physical sun as John 11:9 makes clear). Because He is an *omniscient* Judge, there is *nothing at all*—not a single thing—that He does not bring into the “sunlight” of His countenance!

So as you can see, chapter 1 sets the tone for the entire book of Revelation. Upon reading it, we instantly recognize that Jesus is *perfectly suited* in His role as Judge.

The characteristics of the Judge.

Now the next major section of Revelation involves chapters 2 & 3. In Ch. 2-3 we get an introduction to our Lord's **activity** as Judge. His judgment of the world is not an issue here—this is an earthly scene and relates to the church.

## **II. The Activity of the Judge in the Midst of the Churches (2-3)**

The Judge of all the earth is not detached from a single one of His local churches. With great authority He holds them in His hand and walks in their midst. Therefore, in light of the crucial task the Lord has for each one of His churches as His lampstands, He is now ready to speak to the needs of each as He sees fit.

In His message to each of the local assemblies, the Lord describes Himself in some specific way depending on what each church needed to learn about His character. In chapter 2 and v 1, Christ describes Himself to **the church of Ephesus** as One with power and authority—**He who holds the seven stars**—as well as One who is active among His churches—**He who walks** (literally, the One walking) **in their midst**. And in verse 5, He warns them that they are in serious danger: **I will...remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent**. The Judge of the churches was telling them that if their devotion continued to wane, He would close the church's doors (of course, which He eventually did).

So in chapters 2 & 3, each of the churches hear from the Judge. Four of the churches (Ephesus, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis) receive words of praise *and* rebuke. Two receive praise and no rebuke (Smyrna, Philadelphia). One church receives *only* rebuke (Laodicea).

Of course, in chapters 2-3, we are also introduced to that group of people referred to as “the overcomers.”

One of the crucial issues in Revelation is the identity of the overcomers. Some commentators propose that the overcomers represent *all believers* on the basis of 1 John 5:4-5. However, we are dealing with two distinctly different contexts here. In 1 John 5, John is speaking of people who through a *single instance* of faith in Christ overcome the blindness intrinsic to the present world system so hostile to the gospel. Understanding the gospel and believing it *truly is* a significant victory. And in that sense they have “overcome the world.” But the victory that Jesus is looking for from His people in Revelation 2-3 is *subsequent to* their initial faith in Christ for eternal life and results in *eternal rewards* such as partaking of **the tree of life** (2:7), ruling with Christ over the nations of the earth (2:26; 3:21), and the confession of the overcomer’s name before the Father and His angels (3:5) to name a few. This kind of victory—this kind of overcoming—is not by *faith alone* as in 1 John 5, but involves *demanding endeavors* such as keeping Christ’s works “until the end” (2:26). That we are talking about two different types of victory here is obvious. The overcomers spoken of here in chaps 2-3 are those people who not only believe in Christ for eternal life, but walk in godliness (cf. 2 Pet 1:5-11) and remain faithful to Him until the end of their lives (cf. 2:26; Matt 25:20-21; 2 Tim 2:12).

Chapter 1—the characteristics of the Judge.

Chapters 2-3—The activity of the Judge in the midst of the local churches.

Now we come to chapters 4 & 5.

In chap. 2-3 we have an earthly scene, but in chapters 4-5 we have a heavenly scene and we find that Christ's role as the Judge of the churches does not exhaust His role as judge by any means. **Ch. 4-5 remind us that God has a case for judgment against the world.**

The question these two chapters raise is this: "Who can do this---Who is worthy?" Answer: The Lamb! (A potent one with 7 horns and 7 eyes!). Earlier we saw that in the gospel of John, Jesus said: "The Father judges no man..." The Father has not only delegated the judgment of *the churches* but the judgment of *all mankind* to His Son. So, the one we have met as the Judge of the churches (in chapters 2 & 3) is the one and only one who can exercise judgment on mankind as a whole.

So chapters 4 & 5 give to us...

### **III. The Identification of the Judge of All Mankind (4-5)**

**5:6-7**———And I looked, and behold, in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as though it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent out into all the earth. 7 Then He came and took the scroll out of the right hand of Him who sat on the throne.

In these verses, John sees before him the **Lamb** of God, our Lord Jesus Christ. He is standing **in the midst** of the throne room of God as the very focal point of the heavenly realm—worthy to do what no one else could do— to judge mankind—to open the scroll and loose its seals. He can do this by virtue of the fact that He was—verse 9—**slain**— (Gk: esphagmenon—slaughtered—cf. v 9). But He is not only worthy on the basis of His *earthly experience*—He is worthy on the basis of His *heavenly nature* as well. The Lamb's **seven horns** depict His omnipotence, horns being symbols of power and strength

(cf. 1 Sam 2:10). His **seven eyes** portray His omniscience. Through the ministry of the Holy Spirit (**the seven Spirits of God**) Christ has *perfect awareness* of everything that transpires in **all the earth**, making Him the ideal person to punish rebellious man.

The transfer of the **scroll** from the One **on the throne** to the Lamb is a visual picture of the truth found in John 5:22 & 27 that "...the Father...has committed all judgment to the Son..." (John 5:22).

The world doesn't accept the Lord Jesus Christ as a Judge, but Heaven does. And chap. 4-5 tell us in no uncertain terms that Jesus has the credentials necessary to judge the earth—He has heaven's authorization. He is worthy to open the scroll and to loose its seals.

Now we come to the largest section of Revelation---chapters 6-19.

#### **IV. The Activity of the Judge Among All Mankind (6-19)** (During the seven-year Tribulation Period)

What we have here is a description of His judgments against those who dwell on the earth during the seven years of tribulation that occur immediately after the Rapture of the Church. It is the account of His wrath against man's ungodliness climaxing in His return to earth in chap. 19.

**6:1-2**——Now I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals; and I heard one of the four living creatures saying with a voice like thunder, "Come and see." 2 And I looked, and behold, a white horse. He who sat on it had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer.

Now as John's vision proceeds, he sees the Lamb of God begin to open the seals on the scroll that was given to Him by the Father. He hears a loud **voice** and then he sees a **white horse** and one sitting on it who **went out conquering and to conquer**. I would

like to suggest here that far more important than determining *the identity* of the white-horse rider (as important as that is) is understanding *the judgment* that is being symbolized. The first four seals represent the initial judgments from the hand of the Judge and it is clear from the symbolism here that this first judgment foresees *conquest*—most likely, the divine conquest of rebellious mankind (cf. Ps 45:3-5; Isa 13:11-13).

Some commentators see the rider on the white horse as picturing the Beast—Satan’s coming world ruler, but *nowhere in the Bible* is the Beast portrayed with the symbolism found in v 2. If we view the seals as the Lamb’s judgments on mankind, the conquest pictured here is much more likely to be Christ’s than the Beast’s (cf. Rev 19:11-21). Now Seal #2:

**6:3-4**——When He opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature saying, “Come and see.” 4 Another horse, fiery red, went out. And it was granted to the one who sat on it to take peace from the earth, and that people should kill one another; and there was given to him a great sword.

After the **second seal** is opened, another **horse, fiery red**, goes forth and **peace** is removed **from the earth**. Consequently, murder, violence, and war run rampant as never before. In His “Olivet Discourse” (Matt 24-25), our Lord described the conditions on planet earth for the seven years prior to His return to reign. In Matthew 24:6-8, the Lord spoke concerning its *initial stages*: “And you will hear of *wars and rumors of wars*. See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For *nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom*. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. All these are the *beginning of sorrows*” (Matt 24:6-8; emphasis added).

Even though most commentators view the first half of the seven years as a time of *peace*, it is clear that “the beginning of sorrows” includes a world *completely given over to war and bloodshed*. This colossal bloodshed is pictured by the fiery *red horse* and the **great sword** given to its rider.

Because of time, we cannot look at the numerous judgments that the inhabitants of earth will experience from the hand of the Judge in chapters 6-19. But let’s make sure that we clearly understand that chapters 6-19 deal with **temporal judgment**. The eternal destiny of man is not an issue here. However, in the next section of Revelation, eternal judgment **is** the issue.

After the return of Christ to earth for the Battle of Armageddon in chapter 19, and the binding of Satan and the 1000 year kingdom of Christ in the early part of chapter 20, we come to the well-known passage concerning the Great White Throne Judgment (20:11-15).

#### **V. The Activity of the Judge Among the Lost of all the Ages (20)** (The Great White Throne Judgment)

Not only is Jesus authorized to judge the local churches (in chaps. 2-3) and the sins of man done in time (chaps 6-19), but to judge the destiny of the body and soul as well:

**20:11-15**——Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. <sup>12</sup> And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is *the Book of Life*. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. <sup>13</sup> The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. <sup>14</sup> Then Death

and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.<sup>15</sup> And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.

The world around us does not like to think about eternal judgment. One time I was talking to a Roman Catholic man and told him that I was writing a commentary on the book of Revelation. As soon as he heard the word “Revelation” he said to me, “Oh, don’t talk about Revelation—it’s too scary!” But, as much as the people who are all around us want to push the idea of eternal judgment out of their thoughts, Scripture is very clear that that day will indeed come.

In his vision of the judgment of the unsaved John initially sees two things: **a great white throne** and **Him who sat on it**—the Lord Jesus Christ. The throne is called *great* because it is the throne of the King of kings and Lord of Lords. And it is called *white* because every verdict that proceeds from it is holy, just, and right (cf. Ps 97:2).

In verse 11, John saw the **earth** and **heaven**—in other words, the stellar heavens—fleeing in terror from the Judge’s **face**. This is a graphic picture of just how serious and fearful it will be to stand before Christ at this judgment. Creation is trying, as it were, to “run away” but there is no place to hide: **And there was found no place for them**, meaning, they could not escape!

Verses 11-15 describe **the dead**—the unsaved of all the ages—**standing before God**.

Now as they stand before Christ, **books** (plural) will be **opened** (cf. Dan 7:10). These books contain the works (or, deeds) of every unsaved human: **And the dead were judged according to their works by the things which were written in the books**. Billions of people have died thinking they are good enough to enter God’s eternal

kingdom. So what Christ will do is that He will examine all they've done throughout the course of their lives and will render His verdict (which will be the same for every person before Him—Romans 3:20 puts it this way): "...by the deeds (or, "works") of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight..." (Rom 3:20). Now, one thing I want to make crystal clear is this: the deeds of the unsaved are not the basis on which they are eternally condemned. Notice: **another book** (singular) is **opened** as well—**the Book of Life**—which contains the names of all who have been born again since the beginning of creation through faith in God's promise (cf. Dan 12:1; Luke 10:20; Phil 4:3; Heb 12:23; Rev 3:5, 13:8, 17:8 21:27). Here is the basis of condemnation in the final judgment. People are eternally condemned because their names are not found written in the Book of Life (cf. 20:15)—they have never believed in Christ for eternal life.

Being **cast** into the lake of fire is described as **the second death** (in fact, the MT reads: "This is the second death, the lake of fire"). When a person is arrested for a crime, he is sent to a temporary place of punishment awaiting trial. But once that person has been tried and found guilty, he is sent to a long-term place of punishment. Hades can be conceived of as a prison to which men are temporarily assigned because they have been *bound over* for trial, but the lake of fire is God's permanent prison for the eternally lost (cf. Matt 13:40-42; 25:41; Mark 9:43-44, Jude 7; Rev 21:8). All who die without faith in Christ alone for eternal life—**anyone not found written in the Book of Life**—will experience the second death—**the lake of fire**—forever.

Now we come to the end of the final book in the canon of Scripture. When I spoke on Revelation 4 years ago before I started my commentary, I hadn't determined

how to fit the final 2 chapters into the outline in light of Revelation presenting Christ in His role as Judge. But it finally became clear.

In chapter 1, we see the characteristics of the Judge.

Chapters 2-3, the activity of the Judge in the midst of the churches.

Chapters 4-5, the identification of the Judge of all mankind

Chapters 6-19, the activity of the Judge among all mankind.

Chapter 20, the activity of the Judge among the lost of all the ages.

Now, as we consider the final two chapters, we see that the enemies of God have been dealt with. And once the Judge has completed His work of judgment, we observe *the aftermath of His judgments*—the new heaven and earth—the glorious and eternal dwelling place of Christ and His people (chapters 21-22).

**VI. The aftermath of Judge's work—the new heavens and earth (21-22)**  
(The Judge Becomes the Ruler of the New Heavens and the New Earth)

There is a sense in which the book of Revelation is like the story of the man who videotapes a football game while he goes off to work. On his way home from work as he listens to the radio, he hears that his team has won the football game. As a result, when he finally gets home to watch the game (even though his team is having a lot of problems and is losing after three quarters), the man is not a bit worried because he already knows that his team wins in the end! In the same way, Revelation is a book filled with all kinds of troubles and problems that believers must face in life on this earth (especially those who will be alive during the Tribulation). But the great news is that it tells us how the

game ends—Christ and His people win! Satan is dealt with. The Beast and False Prophet are dealt with. Unsaved humans are dealt with. Sin and sorrow are dealt with (there will be no more tears—the former things are passed away). So what transpires at this point? A new creation—our eternal home—the new heavens and earth.

**21:1-5**— Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. 2 Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God *is* with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them *and be* their God. 4 And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.” 5 Then He who sat on the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new.”

Before we have some questions and answers, allow me to share one more story. It was Vernon Grounds who wrote the following words:

“A friend told me of an incident that happened while he was in seminary. Since the school had no gymnasium, he and his friends played basketball in a nearby public school. Nearby, an elderly janitor waited patiently until the finished playing. Invariably he sat there reading his Bible. One day my friend asked him what he was reading. The man answered, ‘The book of Revelation.’ Surprised, my friend asked if he understood it. ‘Oh, yes,’ the man assured him. ‘I understand it!’ ‘What does it mean?’ Quietly the janitor answered, ‘It means that Jesus is gonna win.’”

If we have believed in Christ for eternal life, we will live forever with Him in His kingdom—that issue is settled. But the question each of us must ask is this: “Will I be a part of that future group of people who will rule with Him for all eternity?” Of course, the answer to that is—if you overcome, you will. May God give all of us the grace to keep His works until the end (Rev 2:26) so that we might have a full share in His ultimate victory!