

FGBC: The Rider and the City: Open the Books

Revelation 20:11-15

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If you've watched "The Lego Movie" you know it's a stop motion and CG film where little Lego characters save the world. It's quite amusing if you get a kick out of watching an inch-tall Batman do war with Lego monsters and poke good fun at movies and Batman in general – which I do.

And then of course, because it made money, there is a sequel. And it's called: "The Lego Movie 2: The Second Part" which is a great name for a sequel mocking sequels and a bit more Batman. Anyway, this film is about surviving Armageddon – which is amazingly relevant for Lego, particularly at a time like this.

Anyway, the movie ends with Lego Batman walking off into a Lego sunset saying "White. Every important movie has to end with a white screen." And then everything fades to white and that's the end.

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Well, today we come to the fade to white passage in Revelation. This is the end, the last day of human history. Or, as we've been talking about it, it's the end of the end before the big beginning.

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If you are new with us, we've been walking through the last book in the Bible passage by passage for a while now. And we are in chapter 20 today.

So wherever you are right now – whether you are in the living room or somewhere exciting like... the kitchen – stand up, refill your coffee and go grab your Bible so you can follow along. I want you to see this in the text and not just take my word for it.

Hear now the word of the Lord:

[Read Revelation 20:11-15]

"White. Every important movie has to end with a white screen." That's my very poor Batman voice. But if you can get past that, you probably noticed the great white throne in this section. This is where God finally dishes out the last bit of justice.

Of course things have been fading to white for a while now, ever since chapter 19 verse 11 where Jesus rides into Armageddon on a white horse and speaks.

And this has always been the way it is with God. So way back in Genesis 1 God spoke creation into existence. It was "Let there be light." And "Let the waters be gathered into one place." And "Let us make mankind in our image." God simply spoke and it happened. And that's the same level of effort that undoes it all at the end.

So all wickedness is there prepared for a fight, and then we come across one of the most ironic realities in the movie industry. There are so many movies made about Armageddon, but none of them have read the script. And the script makes a terrible movie. Everyone prepares for a fight and then Jesus just shows up and it fades to white – that's it.

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Well, while this would make a terrible movie, it makes an incredibly awesome reality. And that's because none of us want a struggle for the throne. If Satan was Jesus' archnemesis then it could go either way in the end. If Jesus slips the universe could belong to the devil. That would be terrible.

But the big point of Revelation is, that isn't reality. And that's important because to our perspective right now it looks like it could be. Things are broken. I don't know if you've noticed but it looks like conflict, disease and injustice reign! But Revelation gives us a glimpse behind the curtain so that we can see that God has His finger on the pulse of the universe. In fact He is orchestrating everything that is happening right now. Really? Covid-19? Yes.

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Lots of people think God twists the bad things that happen in our lives so that something good comes out of them in the end. So, you messed life up. But don't worry, God is smart, He'll figure a way to make lemonade out of your lemons. That's not how it works.

It's not like that on a personal scale, and it's not like this on a global scale. So Coronavirus has closed churches all around the world. Satan's plan no doubt. But don't worry something good will come out of this. Maybe God will find a way to get more people to watch our service online than ever attended in person.

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That might happen, but that's not an accurate picture of reality. That would be God playing defence while Satan is on the throne. And that's not the picture Revelation paints. In fact that's not the picture any of the Bible paints.

So when Joseph's brothers beat him up, sell him to slave traders and forget about him. Joseph responds in the end saying:

You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people. (Genesis 50:20)

What Joseph doesn't say is "You did something evil, but God figured out how to make it good." Joseph doesn't say that. What he says is "You were trying to hurt me, but God had a plan in place long before you were even born. He used you and your wicked plans to bring me to Egypt to save nations of people from starvation." You thought you were being all sneaky, but it turns you guys were part of God's plan from the beginning.

Friends, God is sovereign. And when we say that what we are saying is that there isn't a single molecule in the universe that is doing anything other than what God demands.

So there isn't a single sparrow that falls to the ground without God's say.¹ There isn't a hair on your head that isn't numbered.² Admittedly for some of you that number is small, but luckily all the hair on your back is numbered too. All this is true, and there isn't a single viral mutation that has ever come into existence outside of God's will. Everything happens because God says it will happen.

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That's terrible! God's doing bad stuff then! No, saving people from starvation is good stuff. God uses bad things to accomplish the best things for our good and His glory.

Paul says:

And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose for them. For God knew His people in advance, and He chose them to become like His Son, so that His Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. (Romans 8:28-29)

God has had a plan since before the creation of the world. He knew all of us in advance. And this plan has been set in place and it is the only plan that is being carried out.

Now there are other plans. Satan has a plan. Evil dictators have a plan. Money hungry investors have a plan. Entertainment hungry average citizens have a plan. And Joseph's brothers had a plan. There are a billion plans. But all these plans are subject to God's plan. And so God uses them to bring about His master plan. He is the Master Builder. God causes everything to work together.

And this is the picture that is painted in the book of Revelation. And it's all tied to the throne. Heaven's throne is the dominant context of this book. From Revelation 4 where we found out that the throne isn't up for grabs all the way through to this fade to white, everything in human history plays out relative to the throne.

And the point is that even though our natural eyes can't see it, God has His hands on everything that is happening. And all of it is working towards the moment where God will finally cause justice to reign and bring all creation back to the place He designed it to be in the beginning. God will have the perfect relationship with His creation that He created us for.

And today's text is the last scene before this happens. It's the fade to white. God will have His happily ever after. But first, justice. First death and Hades and everyone who refuses to bow the knee to Christ will be thrown into the lake of fire. Now whether this is a literal place or something figurative, either way it's not going to be a party by the sea. I'm going to leave that there.

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Really there is so much we could unpack here, let me just show you who is on the throne, what's up with the books and why this is all good news.

¹ Matthew 10:29

² Luke 12:7

So first, who is on the throne? Is it God? Is it Jesus? Is it the Lion or the Lamb? Is it the Father who demands righteousness from everyone, or is it the Son who appeases the Father's wrath? Who dishes out justice in the end?

Well, throughout Revelation we actually get two pictures. So in Revelation 4, for example, it's the Lamb who is on the throne. And people sing out "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain." But then in chapter 11 the 24 elders fall on their faces and cry out:

We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because You have taken Your great power and have begun to reign. (Revelation 11:17)

So the throne is always occupied, but in Revelation sometimes it's by the Lamb and sometimes it's by God the Father. And notice our text today is totally nondescript. Verse 11 – it just says: "Then I saw a great white throne and Him who was seated on it." So who is it? Is it the Father, or the Son?

It turns out the answer is "yes," and this is consistent with the rest of the New Testament. So in Romans 14 Paul asks:

Why do you condemn another believer? Why do you look down on another believer? Remember, we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. (Romans 14:10)

That's God the Father. But in 2nd Corinthians we read:

For we must all stand before Christ to be judged. (2 Corinthians 5:10)

That's the Son. Now of course this isn't a contradiction. For the New Testament the answer to this question has always been "both." Yes, the Father and the Son are on the throne. It's not one or the other because they are one. The Father who demands holiness from us is the Son who achieves holiness on our behalf. The Father to whom we owe our debt is the Son who pays our debt.

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This is why the Father isn't evil for sending His Son to die for sinners. He doesn't send someone else; He sends Himself. So God is on the white throne of justice, and Jesus is God.

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And all humanity finds themselves before this throne. And there are books there – verse 12 – multiple books. And then another book was opened – one book. And the dead are judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books – the first set of books. What's up with the books?

Here's the picture: there is a book in heaven for every single person who has ever existed – that's a big library. I've got a book there; you've got a book there. And every single action you've done is written in that book. And we will be judged based on our actions. And this is what the Bible says. So in Romans we read:

For a day of anger is coming, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. He will judge everyone according to what they have done. He will give eternal life to those who keep on doing good... But He will pour out His anger and wrath on those who live for themselves. (Romans 2:5-8)

Peter similarly says:

Remember that the heavenly Father to whom you pray has no favorites. He will judge or reward you according to what you do. (1 Peter 1:17)

So every time a terrible driver cuts you off and you don't wave that one finger at them, and every time you bend the truth in your favor, all this gets recorded. And God is going to open this book on Judgment Day. How does that hit you?

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If you are at all like me your public life is probably pretty good. I mean, sure I've made the occasional mistake, but I've done a good job of giving people around me the sense that I've got things under control. I've figured out spirituality and I've got my life in order. If you think that about me you've bought what I've been selling.

The problem is there is another side of me. After the camera turns off I go home and dad my kids and husband my wife and I take a step down on the awesomeness and virtue scale. I hope this isn't too disappointing for you to realize. I'm a lot more selfish at home than at work. I get tired and lose my composure. I make sure my me time gets respected. I'm not super proud of this, but I'm pretty human at the home level.

Unfortunately that's not where it stops for me. I've got another level that even my wife and kids aren't invited into. My thoughts and motivations lie below even what happens at home – does this resonate with you, or am I the worst one here? At this level all the good things I do just so people notice and think well of me don't happen. This is where who I really am comes out, and the only person who sees it is me and God. And all the things that happen in this realm get recorded right next to the things that happen up in the public realm.

And the dead are judged according to what is recorded in the books. How does this hit you?

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"Hold on, are you saying we get saved if we do enough good works?"

That's a good question. The answer is "No.... but."

No. We are not justified by our works we are justified – or made 'just as if we never sinned' – by our faith in Jesus. So when God looks at people He sees two kinds. The first kind stands as they are, they stand justly condemned as treasonous sinners who have told the God of the universe "I'm not going to live my life Your way, I'm going to be god in my life." And the second kind of people stand behind Christ. These people know they are sinners who have no possible way of pleasing God on their own. And so they have accepted what Christ did on their behalf.

And when God looks at them He looks through the righteousness of Jesus – Jesus has a perfectly right relationship with God – and the Father sees us through Jesus. Jesus takes the punishment we deserve and clothes us with His righteousness. That’s how we get saved. So no, we aren’t saved by works.

But... throughout scripture there is a second side to this coin that can not be forgotten. And that is that our actions matter. How we live matters. And so even when Paul says it is the grace giving Jesus who judges us, he says it like this:

For we must all stand before Christ to be judged. We will each receive whatever we deserve for the good or evil we have done in this earthly body. (2 Corinthians 5:10)

So our actions matter. We are saved by faith, but we get judged by our actions. And there is no contradiction here. Scripture is clear that our actions reveal what we value. Our deeds make plain what we believe. So there is no such thing as a person who believes in Jesus but lives for themselves. That person doesn’t believe in Jesus.

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“Oh no! What about that third layer of me that is so much darker than I ever let on?”

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Thanks be to God there is another book – one book – the book of Life. And this book is different. The other books are contemporary. They are keeping track of everything that goes on today, but this book isn’t like that. It’s a really old book. Back in chapter 13 we read:

All who dwell on the earth will worship [the beast], *everyone* whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life (Revelation 13:8 NASB)

So if you are a Jesus follower then your name was written in this book from before time began, and certainly before you believed or did anything good or bad. Now there’s mystery here. But for today this is Romans 8 all over again:

All things God works for the good.... For those God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son (Romans 8:28-29)

Now we aren’t going to unpack how that all works today, but just hear two pieces of good news: First, it’s great news that God wrote the names in here before we did anything because the power of sin is such that no one would ever choose to get their name in this book on our own. You wouldn’t do it. You were dead in your sins before Christ. So unless God breaks the power of sin, none of us would even care.

And so second, if you are afraid that your name might not be there it probably is. Why? Because if it weren’t there you wouldn’t care. Only people who have Jesus’ Spirit inside them have the desire to be God’s people. So if you have this desire then God is already at work in you. Friends, the good news is we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus – that is good news – and how we live proves it.

Now, today's text is a fade to white text, but today's not Judgment Day. And that means this text is a warning for us. Jesus is calling us, wooing us to respond. He doesn't want you to be thrown away. He wants your name in His book of life. He wants you to have the relationship with Him He designed you to have. And so I want to end with the call this text is giving us: live your life in light of the second book.

Friends, don't let your book define you, let Jesus' book define you. So yes, you've still got dark corners. This isn't a surprise to God. He's made provision for this. John says:
 If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth. But if we confess our sins to Him, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness. (1 John 1:8-9)

If you will come to Jesus as a sinner who needs a Saviour; if you confess how much you need Him and turn away from your sin that has tripped you again then everything wicked that has been recorded in your book will be crossed over, crossed out and covered by the blood of Jesus. Your book will be a bloody mess of forgiveness. And that's great news.

And it doesn't end here. The other book – the Lamb's book of life, yes it has names in it, but it also contains the deeds of the Lamb. My book lists my deeds, and the Lamb's book lists His deeds. But His deeds are deeds done on my behalf. This means His book starts with words like those in Isaiah 53:

He was pierced for our rebellion,
 crushed for our sins.
 He was beaten so we could be whole.
 He was whipped so we could be healed.
 All of us, like sheep, have strayed away.
 We have left God's paths to follow our own.
 Yet the LORD laid on Him
 the sins of us all. (Isaiah 53:5-6)

At judgment, just as everything fades to white, everyone's book is going to be opened. And Jesus' book is going to be opened. And the Father is going to look for your name in Jesus' book. And if it's there it will have born fruit, and you will have been conformed to the image of His Son. You will have been saved by grace, and your actions will show it. The good news is that abundant life – imaging Jesus – starts now.

So let the book of life shape your life now. Jesus died to purchase your salvation and change how your book gets read, so choose to live that out.

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Just one thought in closing. It's quarantine so much of that public life has been striped away and we are all spending a lot of time in the second layer at home and the third layer, by ourselves. And so perhaps you are more aware than ever that you need a Savior and you still need a Saviour. If this is true then it's a perfect time to say "Jesus, I'm sorry for living for my own glory, work in me, conform me to Your image.