

Revelation 20:11-15

When studying any passage in Revelation we must keep in mind the nature of the book. It is universally acknowledged to be the most famous book of prophecy and figurative language in the New Testament. Because of this we must follow good hermeneutical principles as we proceed. We must still start with the idea that every word is literal unless there is sufficient evidence to understand it figuratively.

Another thing we often forget is that no Bible passage can be understood separate and apart from all the other verses in the Bible on the same subject. If there is an apparent conflict between a verse in Revelation and another one in, for example, some of Paul's letters, the one in Revelation must be the one to be understood figuratively.

At this point you may want to read *Hermeneutics for us common folks* on website cliffbaird.wordpress.com. These principles of Bible study will be a great asset as we proceed.

To establish the context, two Greek texts, three interlinears and several of the standard translations (NIV, ASV, NASB, KJV and RSV) were checked. They were all consistent in starting a new subject, indicated by a new paragraph with verse 11 and carrying it through verse 15. So this is the context we will use. We will compare two versions, the NIV and the ASV.

The NIV text says:

*11 Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. 12 And I saw **the dead**, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. **The dead** were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. 13 The sea gave up **the dead** that were in it, and death and Hades gave up **the dead** that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. 14 Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. 15 If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.*

Each verse of the ASV text is listed separately, as follows:

11 And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat upon it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them.

*12 And I saw **the dead**, the great and the small, standing before the throne; and books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and **the dead** were judged out of the things which were written in the books, according to their works.*

*13 And the sea gave up **the dead** that were in it; and death and Hades gave up **the dead** that were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works.*

14 And death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death, even the lake of fire.

15 And if any was not found written in the book of life, he was cast into the lake of fire.

Each verse in the ASV and in the Greek text starts with **and**. This indicates a continuing thought from the previous verse. This just means that John is continuing his description of his vision. The pictures keep changing, like a video or movie, but each new picture is continuing the overall vision. This implies that the new picture in each verse follows the scene from the previous verse. This, in turn, implies that the **casting into the lake of fire** of verse 14 was done after the **judging** of verses 12 and 13. That is why the NIV, WHY, RSV, NKJV all start verse 14 with "then."

Looking at verses 11 through 15 in detail:

11 And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat upon it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them.

Who sat on the throne? Who is assigned the task of judging? To my knowledge it is universally accepted that Christ has been appointed this responsibility, Matthew 28:18, Romans 2:16, 2 Timothy 4:1, etc.

Why is the vision depicting heaven and earth as leaving or vanishing? This scene is occurring in the spirit world, with the spirit of Christ judging the dead, i.e. the spirits of those who have died and have not yet been resurrected. This picture of Heaven and earth fleeing is just completing the vision of a place where there is no physical or material matter. Both the earth and the sky being gone

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emphasizes that the whole picture is spiritual. The Greek word here translated heaven means sky as it does in the other nine verses that use it, Matthew 5:18, Matthew 16:2, Matthew 16:3, Matthew 24:35, Mark 13:31, Luke 4:25, Luke 21:33, Acts 7:49, James 5:18, Revelation 6:14.

The main thought in our context is the judging done in verses 12 and 13.

*12 And I saw **the dead**, the great and the small, standing before the throne; and books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and **the dead** were judged out of the things which were written in the books, according to their works.*

*13 And the sea gave up **the dead** that were in it; and death and Hades gave up **the dead** that were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works.*

Who is described as being judged? The dead. But who are *the dead*? As has been mentioned before, the expression “the dead” is used 103 times in the (NIV) New Testament. Of these 103 verses, 99 times it is clearly referring to the spirits of those who have physically died. Thus, this normal, regular meaning of the phrase “the dead” should be considered first. If we determine that “the dead” means the physically dead, then there is harmony between this passage and the rest of the New Testament which teaches that judgment comes after physical death, for example Hebrews 9:27.

If some should consider the possibility that the phrase, the dead, means spiritually dead then we would have several contradictions:

- 1) Those who are spiritually dead are lost, they have already been judged.
- 2) Some of “the dead” are not thrown into the fire, i.e. those whose names were written in the book, verse 15. But if “the dead” means those who are spiritually dead then all must be thrown into the fire.
- 3) Some who are spiritually dead are still physically living because this scene occurs before the general resurrection. We know this because after the resurrection there are no more "dead," all will be *alive*. But, those who are still alive have a chance to obey and be “raised to life” spiritually. Our text is the scene of a final judgment, with no more chance to change, i.e. those whose names are not written in the book are thrown into the fire.

In addition, **the dead** always means the dead, either physically or spiritually. This phrase never refers to those who have experienced a resurrection. After a resurrection the “person” is always referred to as “alive.” This is always true, whether we are talking of the spiritually dead or the physically dead. The term never refers to those who have experienced a resurrection.

In spite of this evidence some might still want this judging to be done after the general resurrection and therefore includes "everybody" who ever lived, we must consider 1 Corinthians 15:51 "... we will not all die, but we all be changed...." Some will never die, therefore could never be referred to as "the dead." Again we conclude that "the dead" cannot refer to all humans who have ever lived. The phrase represents a very large group, but not everybody.

This seems to be enough evidence to warrant the decision that the phrase “the dead” in our text means the spirits of those who are physically dead and before their resurrection.

But, how is it possible to *see* the spirits? Don't forget that this is a vision, a supernatural work of God. In a vision John can *see* anything that God wants him to see. The Holy Spirit told John to write “I saw the dead,” therefore, John saw the dead! Why is this so hard to believe? For example, we see spirits all the time in movies and think nothing of it. Oh yes, I know, we really only see some image that we “know” are spirits from the context of the movie. Likewise, John saw something and he knew what it was, *and was told* what it was. He was told he saw “the dead.” John was also told to write “I saw” the dead. “Seeing” the dead is not even unique to this scripture. The rich man “saw” Lazarus and Abraham, after their death, in Luke 16:23. Peter, James and John saw Moses and Elijah at the transfiguration, Matthew 17:3, Mark 9:4, Luke 9:30-31. Jesus said in Lu 13:28 "There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you *see* Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out." And just a few verses earlier in Revelation 20:4 John had also seen the souls of those beheaded for the cause of Christ.

We, therefore conclude, John *saw* the spirits of those who had died physically and had not yet been resurrected.

When was this event going to happen? Not, when did John see the vision (*about* 100 A.D.), but when did the event in John's vision occur? Since he saw the dead, the event would take place before the general resurrection because after the general resurrection those

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same spirits would have a new body and no longer be classified as **the dead**! This is in perfect harmony with the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, a judgment after death and before the resurrection.

If this judgment took place before the general resurrection then everyone could not possibly be there all together, all at the same time, because before Christ's return (and the general resurrection) many people are still alive on earth and could not be classified among the dead. Therefore, this cannot be a scene describing everyone being judged all together at the same time.

Another reason this judgment cannot be of everyone at the same time is; it would contradict Luke 16:19 ff. and other verses that teach at death, after the time of Christ, we go directly to Heaven or Hell which implies that a judgment has occurred at the time of death.

Remember John wrote down exactly what he saw. It is our responsibility to gain the meaning from the facts as reported by John, even if those facts might encourage us to rethink some of previously held conclusions.

We must first try to understand the meanings of the words according to their regular, natural and literal meanings. If we can reach a conclusion that does not contradict any other scriptures and is consistent with the general context then our conclusion is probably correct.

Since our text cannot mean that everyone will be at this judgment at the same time, why the reference to "the great and small" being there, and "...the sea and ... Death and Hades" all giving up the dead in them?

If Jesus taught a judgment immediately after death (Luke 16:19 ff.) how is it possible to have a very large group here experiencing judgment together all at the same time?

How can we understand this vision?

When did the people from the Old Testament time experience judgment? We have seen from the evidence that before Christ died no one received the forgiveness of sins, Hebrews 9:15. Those sins were "passed over" (ASV), "passed by" (Marshall's interlinear) or "left unpunished" (NIV) until the *present time*. Romans 3:25-27. Therefore before Christ all who died went to the same place, neither comforted (as was Lazarus) nor tormented (as was the rich man). What then happened to the souls of all who died before Christ? When these facts are taken in conjunction with Ecclesiastes 9:10 (ESV, "**Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.**") they provide sufficient evidence to establish unconsciousness as the condition of all those spirits in Sheol whose bodies had died before the time of Christ. These souls/spirits were in a condition similar to common sleep, alive but inactive. Just waiting. For what? For more details see the website, cliffbaird.wordpress.com the article *Jesus in Sheol/Hades*, a summary of which follows.

When Christ died He went into Hades, which was really Sheol, Acts 2:27, 31. Why did He go there? What did he do there? There are at least three verses which help us to understand His trip into Sheol.

- 1) 1 Peter 3:18-19 He went and preached (past tense) to the spirits in prison,
- 2) 1 Peter 4:5-6 The gospel was preached (past tense) even to those who are dead (even to the dead. ASV),
- 3) John 5:25 "...a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the son of God and those who hear will live.

The book of 1 Peter was written about 64-65 A.D. When Peter speaks in the past tense it refers to something that happened before he wrote the book. Christ died and was resurrected about 33 A.D. So the timing mentioned by Peter fits with Christ preaching in Sheol after His death and before His resurrection.

John 5:25 is especially noteworthy. Notice two things:

- a) "*the dead*" will hear the voice of Jesus. The hearers will have an option, "*...and those who hear will live.*"
- b) When will this happen? Jesus said the "time is coming" (future tense) and "has now come" (present tense) when the dead "will hear" (future tense), compare this to John 4:23.

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The event had not happened yet, but it was to happen soon enough to say "the time has now come." This timing seems to fit His trip into Sheol (Hades) at His death.

Who then was there at this judgment described in Revelation 20:12? Verse 12 says *And I saw **the dead**, the great and the small, standing before the throne.*" Do we have any other information about a judgment of a large group of *the dead* that would be judged at the same time?

Yes, at the second coming of Christ all the people living on earth at that time will be judged at the same time. But the group in Revelation 20:12 cannot be those, because the judgment described in Revelation 20 occurs before the general resurrection. The people on earth at the time of the second coming are alive, not part of "the dead," 1 Corinthians 15:51-52. Those alive at the second coming will "not sleep" but will be transformed "in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye," never having died, therefore never having been a part of "the dead." This is another reason why Revelation 20:12 cannot refer to when Christ returns.

The only group of people who fit the description in Revelation 20 are all the people who were in Sheol when Jesus went there and preached. They were all together at the same time and in the same *place*, Sheol. Both good and bad. In the same place, waiting to be judged. They were judged in verse 13:

*13 And the sea gave up **the dead** that were in it; and death and Hades gave up **the dead** that were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works.*

Some have objected that the dead cannot have its usual meaning of spirits because verse 13 says, in part, *And the sea gave up **the dead** that were in it...* and there are no spirits in the sea. What then would the objector say was in the sea to be given up? Certainly not bodies because the sea has no bodies either. After only a few weeks in the open sea the human body decays either to nothing or to just bones depending on how many sea creatures have feasted on the remains. If, in verse 13, "the dead" does not mean spirits and it does not mean bodies, then what does it mean?? Once again Ockham's razor (*Hermeneutics for us common folks* on website cliffbaird.wordpress.com) might help us here. All that was previously said about the ability to *see* spirits (page 2) can apply here. The simplest explanation that fits the facts is that in this verse also "the dead" means the spirits of the physically dead, and the sea, death and Sheol, giving up their dead is just harmonizing with the previous idea in verse 12 that everyone who died before Christ will be judged, without exception, even those who died at sea, and *"and they were judged every man according to their works."*

14 And death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death, even the lake of fire.

Verse 14 which says, in part, *And death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire.* When the word Hades is used it either means Sheol as it does in Acts 2:27, 31 or it is synonymous with Hell as it is in the Gospels, for example Luke 16:23.

Remember this event of judging is occurring before the general resurrection which occurs at the second coming, 1 Thessalonians 4:13. Therefore, the throwing of death and Sheol into the lake of fire happens before the second coming. This being true, Hades cannot be understood as it is in the traditional view, else the two part Hadean world would be thrown into the lake of fire before the general resurrection. This would leave no place of residence for those who died after the "throwing" event and before the second coming.

The traditional view would also require that Paradise be thrown into Hell, which seems very incongruous.

The discarding of Sheol into the lake of fire signifies the end of the place where all the dead resided (in *rest*, in *sleep*, or *nothingness*) before the resurrection of Christ. But, what about *death*? Why is *death* also thrown into the lake of fire?

Death is used 18 times in the book of Revelation. All four times *Hades* is used in this book it is tied to *death*, i.e. *death and Hades*. The other six times where Hades is used in the New Testament it is used alone. Why in the book of Revelation is Hades always tied to death?

Could it be a coincidence? Thereby having no meaning? Are there words or combination of words in the Bible that have no significance? We know that God does not use *filler* in His word! Every word, in context, means something! Every combination of words, in context, has a purpose for being there. If this is true, then the use of *death* **and** *Hades* together has some significance.

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The word *death* is used 18 times in 15 verses in Revelation. Four of the 18 times (2:11, 20:6, 20:14 and 21:8) it is tied to the adjective *second*. The *second death* is defined as the lake of fire (Hell) in 20:14 and 21:8. Therefore in these four verses *the second death* refers to the transferring of souls into hell. This implies that the first death refers to the separation of our bodies from our souls at physical death. Revelation 2:11 and 20:6 says that those who die in the Lord have no fear of the second death i.e., of being cast into Hell.

An additional four times *death* is tied to Hades (1:18, 6:8, 20:13 and 20:14). The other 10 verses using *death* are talking about physical death. Let us look at the 4 times *death and Hades* are used together:

1:18 and the Living one; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive for ever more, and I have the keys of death and of Hades.

6:8 And I saw, and behold, a pale horse: and he that sat upon him, his name was Death; and Hades followed with him. And there was given unto them authority over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with famine, and with death, and by the wild beasts of the earth.

20:13 And the sea gave up the dead that were in it; and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works.

20:14 And death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death, even the lake of fire.

Death is a state of being. It is not a place. It is used here figuratively as if it were a place being tied to Hades/Sheol. Why? John, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, wants to use *death* in these 4 verses to tell us something different than the word specifies if used alone or with the adjective *second*. If the word is used alone its normal and usual meaning is physical death which has been, or will be, experienced by all who are not alive when Christ comes. This normal use of *death* is not what John is trying to tell us, else he would not have tied it to all four occurrences of Hades in the book of Revelation. If not the physical death experienced by all, then what? Is the death associated with Sheol different that all other physical death? Yes, it is, ***at least in one way***. The death associated with Sheol is a transfer from the state of the living into a state ofwell, ... sleep/inactivity/nothingness. At least it is nothingness as far as the Bible tells us. Those who died before Christ were **not** in a state of comfort **nor** torment. Therefore, nothingness. If you prefer the word "rest" or "sleep" that's understandable. We know these two words and are comfortable with them and they may even be better than *nothingness*. The point is the process that yielded souls into Sheol was a different process than the death after Christ. The death after Christ transferred one to judgment and afterward into comfort, as Lazarus, or torment, as the rich man. Maybe the *death* that is tied to Sheol in the expression *death and Hades* (Sheol) is the death that transferred someone into unconsciousness/nothingness. That type of death or process died, was terminated, ended at the same time as Sheol, as both death and Sheol were cast into Hell. This all happened after the death and before the resurrection of Christ when both *death and Hades* (Sheol) were cast into the lake of fire, Revelation 20:14.

The simplest solution that accords with all the facts and produces the least problems is that all four times the word Hades is used in Revelation it means Sheol, the place where all the dead resided before Christ's resurrection. The *death* that was tied to Sheol and cast into the fire was that special death that transferred the souls of the living into the sleep or unconsciousness of Sheol.

Therefore, in Revelation the word *death* is used three ways: 1) when tied to the adjective *second* it implies a place, i.e. Hell, 2) when tied to Hades it means that type of death that transferred a person into Sheol (rest, sleep or unconsciousness), and 3) when it stands alone it means physical death.

15 And if any was not found written in the book of life, he was cast into the lake of fire.

This last statement seems to be the easiest to understand, although the most dramatic in effect. some of those who were/are judged will be sent to everlasting Hell.

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Summary

In our study of Revelation 20:11-15 we have tried to demonstrated beyond a reasonable doubt that:

- 1) All four times the phrase “the dead” is used in our text, it means the spirits, currently in Sheol/Hades, of those who have died and been separated from their bodies and have not yet been resurrected.
- 2) The large group of "the dead" that are judged in verse 12 are all those who died before Christ and were judged by Him while He was in Sheol/Hades, Acts 2:27, 31.
- 3) The special death that put people into Sheol, and Sheol itself, were cast into the fire (v. 14) by Christ when he was in Hades (Sheol) preaching to all the residents there.

Remember that if these conclusions are not accepted, there must be more or better evidence to support an alternative view or you will be guilty of accepting a position with less evidence than the one you rejected and also implying that God is supporting the truth with less evidence than a false alternative.

Of course, it is understood that not everyone will agree with these conclusions. Our plea is that all will evaluate this evidence with an open mind and a sincere heart and share with us any errors you find in our use of scriptures and/or logic.