

THE BOOK OF DEEDS AND THE BOOK OF LIFE

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14

“As I looked, “thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze. A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him. Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court was seated, and the books were opened... “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

Revelation 20:11-15

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and the heavens fled from his presence, and there was no place for them.

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. 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 they had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.

MESSAGE:

Sociologists have estimated that there are over six thousand religions in the world today. They classify them in different groups: naturalistic religions, pantheistic religions, theistic religions, spiritistic religions. polytheistic religions and postmodern religions. There is atheistic religion, agnostic religion, existential religion, transcendental religion and secular humanism. Back in the 80's there was Richard Pryor's "Church of the Head Bossman" who was always "lookin' good." In the 70's there was Flip Wilson's "Church of What's Happenin' Now." In the 60's there was Jules Feifer's "First Existential Church of Greenwich Village" which had inscribed on its cornerstone: "Christ Died For Our Sins: Dare We Dishonor That Sacrifice By Refusing To Commit Them?"

All joking aside, with so many religions to choose from, how can someone know they have chosen the right one? Or to ask the question in a different way, how can we be sure that Christianity is the right religion?

Well, I'm happy to say that I can clear all this up very easily. The fact is, there are not six thousand plus religions in the world; there are only two. There is a religion of works and there is a religion of grace. Works-based religion comes in six thousand different forms but grace-based religion comes in only one. All six thousand forms of works-based religion say that we have to earn God's favor by doing certain things he has commanded us to do. The one grace-based religion says that there is nothing we can do to earn God's favor: we can only receive it as a gift.

You can always recognize a works religion by its basic message: if you do good works that please God, God will reward you. There are a variety of things that different works-based religions call good works. Good works for a Moslem include praying five times a day, making a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in one's life, fasting during Ramadan, reciting the Islamic confession of faith, and contributing to charity. In some cases, killing an infidel can count as a special good work. Moslems who do these things are rewarded with paradise when they die. A Hindu's goal is to be united with Brahman: the world soul. He achieves this through karma, a series of rebirths or reincarnations that move him closer to the world soul if he has done enough good works during his lifetime or further away from the world soul if he hasn't done enough. His status is reflected in the form of life into which he is reborn—whether it is higher or lower in the chain of being. Worship for a Hindu consists of going to the temple to worship where he is rewarded with strength, economic success, healthy families and the power to overcome bad omens. In Taoism, a major religion of China, observing a vegetarian diet, offering ritual sacrifices to deceased gods, and maintaining physical health are rewarded with longevity—even physical immortality. And there are many others. The thing they all have in common is the belief that human beings, through their own efforts or deeds, can achieve spiritual peace and perfection by pleasing God—or the gods that be. Whether this peace is called paradise or Nirvana or physical immortality, the idea is that if you do certain things that God requires, he will reward you.

In essence, this is “marketplace” religion. When we imagine that if we give God what he wants he will give us what we want, we are basically bartering with Him. It's this for that, quid pro quo, scratch God's back and he'll scratch yours. Our good works bring forth His blessings. When you think about it, it's not surprising that this is the kind of religion human beings come up with when they fabricate a God out of their own imagination: they construct a God who resembles themselves, a God made in their own image. That's how the world works so that's how it must work with God. Of course, when we create a God out of our imagination, we have, by definition, an imaginary God. And an imaginary God cannot do anything but fill our imagination.

But there is another religion, one created by God and not by man, and this religion is utterly different from works-based religions. This religion teaches us that we are not God's trading partners, but God's children, and that just as parents love their children because they are their children and not because of anything they've done, God loves us because we are His children and not because of anything we've done or not done. This religion teaches us that God's thoughts and ways are as far above ours as the heavens are higher than the earth, and that God knows what we need better than we do. And this religion teaches us that what we need most of all is to be set free from the sinful natures that are destroying us. This God is not a genie or a Santa Claus; He is a Father who wants to help His children to grow up—in their faith, in their hope and in their love. And since we cannot do this if we're left to our sinful natures, He does it for us. He shows us our sins, strikes our hearts with repentance, and then shows us His love and mercy by forgiving those same sins. There's nothing we can do to earn this; God does it unilaterally and unconditionally: all we can do is receive it, as the hand of a beggar receives a gift from a king.

This is, in short, the Gospel, the good news of the free forgiveness of sins in Christ Jesus. *"The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."* (Romans 6:23)

Now it's fairly easy to see the difference between religions of works and the Good News of God's grace in Jesus Christ. But it's not always so easy to recognize works-religion when it creeps in and gets mixed up with the Gospel. And make no mistake, it does! We are, by virtue of our sinful nature, almost irresistibly drawn to works religion. At some deep level of our being, we remain convinced that there is no such thing as a free lunch and that you get only what you earn. In other words, we have a problem believing the Gospel. God keeps trying to give us his grace and mercy and peace, and we keep trying to earn it. Our pride just won't let us fully accept the idea that we are the beneficiaries of something that we don't really deserve. God has made us His heirs and like the prodigal son when he became aware that he was perishing in his sins, we prefer to work our way back into the Father's good graces than inherit them. And so ever since God promised Abraham descendants who would outnumber the stars in the sky, we, those descendants who share the faith of Abraham, have been trying to sneak works-religion back into the Gospel.

That's why the two texts for today from the *Book of Daniel* and the *Book of Revelation* are so important: they show us with absolute clarity whether we will be judged by our works or by our faith on the last day. In Chapter Seven of *Daniel*, the prophet is shown the throne room of God on the Day of Judgment. God—the Ancient of Days—appears as the judge. His hair and clothing are white, signifying His purity. His throne blazes with fire, signifying His limitless power. A river of fire flows forth from His throne, signifying the Holy Spirit which goes out into all the world. The Judge takes His seat and *books are opened*.

What are these books? We're shown a close-up of them when John is shown the same throne room in *Chapter 20* of the *Book of Revelation*. Once again we are told that "...books were opened." Then we are told what's in the books. "*The dead*," he writes, "*were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books.*" The books, then, are the record of all the deeds of mankind—all our thoughts and words and actions: hidden and public, good and bad, holy and sacrilegious—all of them. Next we are told, "*And the dead were judged according to what they had done.*"

Now that puts us between a rock and a hard place because we've done a lot of things we shouldn't have done—things that were against God's law. And as Paul writes in *Galatians*: "*Curse is everyone who does not continue to do everything that is written in the Book of the Law.*" (*Galatians 3:10*) So that's it, folks! The jig is up, our goose is cooked. We're going to be judged on the basis of what we have done—and by God's standards, we've done very poorly indeed. But wait a minute—it turns out that there's another book—something called the "Book of Life." And what is this book of life? Well, it's even more ancient than the Books of Deeds. Moses mentions it in *Ex. 32:32-33*. David speaks of it in *Psalms 69*. Daniel refers to it at the end of his vision. Paul refers to it in his letter to the *Philippians*. Jesus mentions it in the tenth chapter of the *Gospel of Luke*. In the *Book of Revelation*, John describes those whose names are written in the *Book of Life* and even tells us who is the keeper of the Book. He describes them as, "...those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life." (*Revelation 21:27*) Only those who have been cleansed and made pure by the blood of the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, who have entrusted themselves to His redeeming and sanctifying power are in the Book of Life and will live forever. As for the rest, "*If anyone's name was not written in the Book of Life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.*"

And there you have it. We're either judged on the basis of our deeds or we're judged on the basis of being included in the Lamb's book of life. We live by our works and die by our works or we trust God's grace in Jesus Christ and we live forever. It's that simple.

Finally, Daniel tells us, all power and authority are given to the Son of Man, Jesus Christ. He is given a "*..dominion that is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.*" (*Daniel 7:14*) So it will be Jesus, Son of man and Son of God, Lamb of God and Conqueror of Sin and Death, who will rule forever in God's kingdom. And those whose names are in His Book of Life will reign with Him.

My friends, we can't work our way into God's kingdom, but it is ours for the asking.

Amen.