

The Great Assize

By John Wesley

Text from the 1872 edition - Thomas Jackson, editor
from www.wordsofwesley.com

Proper Cite: John Wesley. Sermon 15 "The Great Assize" in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson via WordsOfWesley.com (Accessed Nov 08,2024)

Sermon Number Sermon 15

Sermon Title The Great Assize

Sermon Footnote (text of the 1872 edition) [i.e., The Last Judgment -- GL] Preached at the Assizes held before the Honorable Sir Edward Clive, Knight, one of the Judges of His Majesty's Court of Common Pleas, in St. Paul's Church, Bedford, on Friday, March 10, 1758; published at the request of William Cole, Esq., High Sheriff of the county, and others. [158] "Our gracious Sovereign" is George II. Wesley was always intensely loyal. In 1744 he wrote an Address from his Societies to the King in which he says, "we are ready to obey your Majesty to the uttermost, in all things which we conceive to be agreeable [to the Word of God]. And we earnestly exhort all with whom we converse, as they fear God to honor the King." The Address was not sent, mainly because it might have been taken to imply that the Methodists were "a body distinct from the National Church." in 1745, the year of the Young Pretenders's invasion of England, he wrote to the Mayor of Newcastle, "All I can do for his Majesty, whom I honor and love -- I think not less than I did my own father -- is this: I cry unto God, day by day, to put all his enemies to confusion," etc. When George II died in October 1760 he records in his Journal (October 25), "King George was gathered to his fathers. When will England have a better Prince?" One thinks of Carlyle (Sartor 1. 9). "Has not your Red hanging-individual a horsehair wig, squirrel-skins, and a plush-gown, whereby all mortals know that he is a JUDGE. Society, which the more I think of it astonishes me the more, is founded upon Cloth." Wesley never despised form and ceremonial; he robed himself even for his Bible studies with his Societies in London and Bristol and for his open-air services. [159] This paragraph, finely and impressively composed as it is, is a defiance of all sound exegesis. Some of the passages quoted refer to the invasion of Judah by the Assyrians,

some to the coming of the Holy Ghost, some to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, some to the downfall of Rome herself. All these were in a sense "days of Jehovah;" but there is no warrant for transferring all these signs to the final day of judgement, nor for their literal interpretation. This just remark on the difference between the present and the resurrection bodies is worked out in detail in Sermon 138, originally written by Benjamin Calamy and revised and abridged by Wesley in 1732. "Substance" and "properties" are here used in their philosophical sense "the body will be the same in essence (not composed of the same material particles), but its properties, i. e. its characteristics and qualities will be entirely changed. Above all, it will be a "pneumatical" and not a "physical" body, i. e. it will be well adapted for the use and manifestation of the spirit, as the present body is adapted for the use and manifestation of the psyche or animal soul." Hades" is a very properly substituted for the A.V. "hell," which is here, and indeed in all passages where is the translation of Sheol, or Hades, most misleading to the English reader. It is the world of departed spirits, not the place of punishment of the Devil and his angels. [160] "All nations" -- more exactly "all the Gentiles." This account of the judgement refers only to the judgement of the heathen nations, who have not heard of Christ; and the standard of judgement is according not their relation to Him, but their fulfillment of the common human duties of kindness and charity there set out. It is a supplement to the three preceding parables of the Steward, the Virgins, and the Talents; the first describing the judgement of the Christian minister, the second and third the two sides of the judgment of those who have heard the gospel; first from the point of view of faith, second from the point of view of works." The beloved disciple." Wesley of course accepts the Johannine authorship of the Apocalypse. [161] "Outbeaming," more exact than the A.V. "brightness." The Son is to the Father as the rays of light are to the sun. "Thought it not robbery:" better, "thought it not an object to be grasped at" to be equal with God. He laid aside for the time His equality with the Father, which was therefore restored to Him when God gave Him the name that is above every name. [162] Pole quotes from Joseph Mede, "Quod jam dixi diem judicii, non intelligi velim de die brevi, sive paucarum horarum; sed de spatio mille annorum quibus dies illa durabit; i.e. The day of judgement is not to be understood as a short day of a few hours, but as the space of a thousand years, during which

that day will last." [163] The "eminent writer" is Edward Young, the author of *Night Thoughts*. The quotation is from his poem, "The Last Day" (1721), 2.19. The original runs: To smooth and lengthen out th' unbounded space. Twice a planetary height. Young, 2:282 says: Now the descending triumph stops its flight From earth full twice a planetary height. Presumably he means twice as far from the earth as the farthest planet. All this seems rather solemn trifling. [164] "Four hundred millions;" it is now estimated as, more or less, fifteen hundred millions. But a few millions more or less are not worth considering in such an altogether indeterminate calculation as this. The quotation is again from Young, 2. 193. Wesley protest vigorously against any one altering his own or his brother's verse; but he never hesitates to do the same thing to other people's; the original passage in Young runs -- Great Xerxes' world in arms, proud Cannae's field. Where Carthage taught victorious Rome to yield, Immortal Blenheim, fam'd Ramillia's host. They all are here, and here they are lost. Their millions sell to be discerned in vain, Lost as a billow in th' unbounded main. [165] The quotation is from Virgil's *Aeneid*, 6.567. The subject of the verbs is Rhadamanthus, the mythical judge of the dead. No translation is furnished in the 1771 ed. Modern editions give Dryden's version. The meaning is "Rhadamanthus of Gnosus here holds his iron sway, and scourges them and hears their guile, and compels each man to confess the expiations put off till death (alas! too late!) which were due for the crimes he committed on earth, rejoicing in the vain hope that they might be concealed." [166] "To justify the way of God to man:" from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, 1. 26. In the original the last line is "men." [167] "The third heaven" Paul (2 Cor. 12:2) tells how he was caught up into the third heave, or paradise, and heard unutterable words which it is not in the power of man to speak, It is doubtful where he thought of three heavens only -- viz. the heaven of the atmosphere and clouds, the heaven of the sun and stars, and the heaven of the blessed dead -- or accepted the Jewish belief in seven heavens, of which Paradise was the third in order from below. Wesley admits of no hope for the finally impenitent, and interprets literally these passages which speak of their doom. In the first, however, Hell is Sheol, and all that the Psalmist says is that all the nations (no the people) that forget God will depart in to the world of the dead. In the Sermon 73, on Hell, he is quite explicit as to his belief in the endless torment of the wicked in material fire. Neither of these sermons are,

however, part of the standard Methodist doctrine. [168] The finale destruction of the earth by means of fires is quite within the bounds of possibility. The impact of some wandering star would generate heat enough for the purpose; of it may be that gravitation will at last overcome the centrifugal force and the arch will fall into the sun. But such speculations are as fruitless as they are uncertain; and the idea in the next paragraph of the origin of the sea of glass is merely grotesque. [169] Cicero is the author of the phrase "minute philosophers." He speaks in de Senect= 23 of "Quidam minuti philosophi," meaning trifling, insignificant. In English use it rather means meticulous, over-precise, speculators. All this discussion as to quantity of fire is absurd: fire is not a thing, but a state of violent chemical combination; a match is quite enough to kindle a conflagration if there be fuel enough. Wesley was keenly interested in electrical phenomena, and was the first man in England to make use of it as a curative agent. His pamphlet called *The Desideratum; or, Electricity made Plain, and Useful*, published in 1760, details many of Franklin's experiments, such as drawing sparks out of the human body or from the fur of a cat. This is what he is thinking of when he says that our bodies are full of fire." Freethinker" was a name claimed by the Deists and other rejecters of the Christian revelation at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Here Wesley uses it of Ovid, the Roman poet, with a kind of suggestion that the modern freethinkers were akin to him in their religious views. The quotation is from the *Metamorphoses*, 1. 256, where Jupiter, preparing to hurl his thunderbolts, hesitates to do so lest he should set the ether aflame, "for he remembers that it is amongst the decrees of the Fates that a time will come when the sea, the earth, and the palace of heaven shall catch fire and blaze, and the mass of the world, so laboriously constructed, shall be imperilled." [170] "Your in conscience;" so the author of the old Kentish *Poema Morale* says: Elch man sceal him then biclupien and ecach sceal him demen; His aye weorc and his ithanc to witesse he sceal temen, which is, being interpreted. Every man shall accuse himself there, and every man shall judge himself; His own work and his conscience he shall bring to witness." See! See! He cometh!" One of Wesley's finest and most impassioned perorations.

Sermon Scripture "We shall all stand before the judgement-seat of Christ." Rom. 14:10.

Intro

1. How many circumstances concur to raise the awfulness of the present solemnity! -- The general concourse of people of every age, sex, rank, and condition of life, willingly or unwillingly gathered together, not only from the neighboring, but from distant, parts; criminals, speedily to be brought forth and having no way to escape; officers, waiting in their various posts, to execute the orders which shall be given; and the representative of our gracious Sovereign, whom we so highly reverence and honor. The occasion likewise of this assembly adds not a little to the solemnity of it: to hear and determine causes of every kind, some of which are of the most important nature; on which depends no less than life or death, death that uncovers the face of eternity! It was, doubtless, in order to increase the serious sense of these things, and not in the minds of the vulgar only that the wisdom of our forefathers did not disdain to appoint even several minute circumstances of this solemnity. For these also, by means of the eye or ear, may more deeply affect the heart: and when viewed in this light, trumpets, staves, apparel, are no longer trifling or insignificant, but subservient, in their kind and degree, to the most valuable ends of society. [158]

2. But, as awful as this solemnity is, one far more awful is at hand. For yet a little while, and "we shall all stand before the judgement-seat of Christ." "For, as I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall confess to God." And in that day, "every one of us shall give account of himself to God."

3. Had all men a deep sense of this, how effectually would it secure the interests of society! For what more forcible motive can be conceived to the practice of genuine morality? to a steady pursuit of solid virtue? an uniform walking in justice, mercy, and truth? What could strengthen our hands in all that is good, and deter us from all evil, like a strong conviction of this, "The Judge standeth at the door;" and we are shortly to stand before him?

4. It may not therefore be improper, or unsuitable to the design of the present assembly, to consider, -- I. The chief circumstances which will precede our standing before the judgement-seat of Christ; II. The

judgement itself; and, III. A few of the circumstances which will follow it.

I

I. 1. Let us, in the first place, consider the chief circumstances which will precede our standing before the judgement-seat of Christ. And, first, God will show "signs in the earth beneath" (Acts 2:19); particularly He will "arise to shake terribly the earth." "The earth shall reel to and fro like a drunkard, and shall be removed like a cottage" (Isa. 24:20). "There shall be earthquakes," kata topous (not in divers only, but) "in all places;" not in one only, or a few, but in every part of the habitable world (Luke 21:2); even "such as were not since men were upon the earth, so mighty earthquakes and so great." In one of these "every island shall flee away, and the mountains will not be found" (Rev. 16:20). Meantime all the waters of the terraqueous globe will feel the violence of those concussions; "the sea and waves roaring" (Luke 21:25), with such an agitation as had never been known before, since the hour that "the fountains of the great deep were broken up," to destroy the earth, which then "stood out of the water and in the water." The air will be all storm and tempest, full of dark vapors and "pillars of smoke" (Joel 2:30); resounding with thunder from pole to pole, and torn with ten thousand lightnings. But the commotion will not stop in the region of the air; "the powers of heaven also shall be shaken. There shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars" (Luke 21:25, 26); those fixed, as well as those that move round them. "The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord come" (Joel 2:31). "The stars shall withdraw their shining" (Joel 3:15), yea, and "fall from heaven" (Rev. 6:13), being thrown out of their orbits. And then shall be heard the universal shout, from all the companies of heaven, followed by the "voice of the archangel," proclaiming the approach of the Son of God and Man, "and the trumpet of God," sounding an alarm to all that sleep in the dust of the earth (1 Thess. 4:16). In consequence of this, all the graves shall open, and the bodies of men arise. The sea also shall give up the dead which are therein (Rev. 20:13), and every one shall rise with "his own body:" his own in substance, although so changed in its properties as we cannot now conceive. "For this corruptible will" then

"put on incorruption, and this mortal put on immortality" (1 Cor. 15:53). Yea, "death and hades," the invisible world, shall "deliver up the dead that are in them" (Rev. 20:13). So that all who ever lived and died, since God created man, shall be raised incorruptible and immortal. [159]

2. At the same time, "the Son of Man shall send forth his angels" over all the earth; "and they shall gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other" (Matt. 24:31). And the Lord himself shall come with clouds, in his own glory, and the glory of his Father, with ten thousand of his saints, even myriads of angels, and shall sit upon the throne of his glory. "And before him shall be gathered all nations; and he shall separate them one from another, and shall set the sheep," the good, "on his right hand, and the goats," the wicked, "upon the left" (Matt. 25:31, etc.). Concerning this general assembly it is, that the beloved disciple speaks thus: "I saw the dead," all that had been dead, "small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened" (a figurative expression, plainly referring to the manner of proceeding among men), "and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works" (Rev. 20:12). [160]

II

II. These are the chief circumstances which are recorded in the oracles of God, as preceding the general judgement. We are, secondly, to consider the judgement itself, so far as it hath pleased God to reveal it.

1. The person by whom God will judge the world, is his only-begotten Son, whose "goings forth are from everlasting;" "who is God over all, blessed for ever." Unto him, being "the outbeaming of his Father's glory, the express image of his person" (Heb. 1:3), the Father "hath committed all judgement, because he is the Son of Man" (John 5:22, 27); because, though he was "in the form of God, and thought it not robbery to be equal with God, yet he emptied himself, taking upon him the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men" (Phil. 2:6, 7); yea, because, "being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself" yet farther, "becoming obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God hath highly exalted him," even in his human nature, and

"ordained him," as Man, to try the children of men, "to be the Judge both of the quick and the dead;" both of those who shall be found alive at his coming, and of those who were before gathered to their fathers. [161]

2. The time, termed by the prophet, "the great and the terrible day," is usually, in Scripture, styled the day of the Lord. The space from the creation of man upon the earth, to the end of all things, is the day of the sons of men; the time that is now passing over us is properly our day; when this is ended, the day of the Lord will begin. But who can say how long it will continue? "With the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day" (2 Pet. 3:8). And from this very expression, some of the ancient fathers drew that inference, that, what is commonly called the day of judgement would be indeed a thousand years: and it seems they did not go beyond the truth; nay, probably they did not come up to it. For, if we consider the number of persons who are to be judged, and of actions which are to be inquired into, it does not appear that a thousand years will suffice for the transactions of that day; so that it may not improbably comprise several thousand years. But God shall reveal this also in its season. [162]

3. With regard to the place where mankind will be judged, we have no explicit account in Scripture. An eminent writer (but not he alone; many have been of the same opinion) supposes it will be on earth, where the works were done, according to which they shall be judged; and that God will, in order thereto, employ the angels of his strength --. To smooth and lengthen out the boundless space, And spread an area for all human race. But perhaps it is more agreeable to our Lord's own account of his coming in the clouds, to suppose it will be above the earth, if not "twice a planetary height." And this supposition is not a little favored by what St. Paul writes to the Thessalonians: "The dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who remain alive shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thess. 4:16, 17). So that it seems most probable, the great white throne will be high exalted above the earth. [163]

4. The persons to be judged, who can count, any more than the drops of rain, or the sands of the sea? "I beheld," saith St. John, "a great

multitude which no man can number, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands." How immense then must be the total multitude of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues; of all that have sprung from the loins of Adam, since the world began, till time shall be no more! If we admit the common supposition, which seems no ways absurd, that the earth bears, at any one time, no less than four hundred millions of living souls, men, women, and children; what a congregation must all those generations make, who have succeeded each other for seven thousand years ! Great Xerxes' world in arms, proud Cannae's host, They all are here; and here they all are lost. Their numbers swell to be discern'd in vain; Lost as a drop in the unbounded main. Every man, every woman, every infant of days, that ever breathed the vital air, will then hear the voice of the Son of God, and start into life, and appear before him. And this seems to be the natural import of that expression, "the dead, small and great:" all universally, all without exception, all of every age, sex, or degree; all that ever lived and died, or underwent such a change as will be equivalent with death. For long before that day, the phantom of human greatness disappears, and sinks into nothing. Even in the moment of death, that vanishes away. Who is rich or great in the grave? [164]

5. And every man shall there "give an account of his own works;" yea, a full and true account of all that he ever did while in the body, whether it was good or evil. O what a scene will then be disclosed, in the sight of angels and men! -- while not the fabled Rhadamanthus, but the Lord God Almighty, who knoweth all things in heaven and in earth, -- *Castigatque, auditque dolos; subigitque fateri Quae quis apud superos, furto laetatus inani, Distulit in seram commissa piacula mortem.* [O'er these drear realms stern Rhadamanthus reigns, Detects each artful villain, and constrains To own the crimes long veil'd from human sight: In vain! Now all stand forth in hated light.] Nor will all the actions alone of every child of man be then brought to open view, but all their words; seeing "every idle word which men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgement" (Matt. 12:36, 37); so that "by thy words," as well as works, "thou shalt be justified; and by thy words thou shalt be condemned." Will not God then bring to light every circumstance also that accompanied every word or action, and if not altered the nature, yet lessened or increased the goodness or badness,

of them? And how easy is this to him who is "about our bed, and about our path, and spieth out all our ways!" We know "the darkness is no darkness to him, but the night shineth as the day." [165]

6. Yea, he will bring to light, not the hidden works of darkness only, but the very thoughts and intents of the heart. And what marvel? For he "searcheth the reins, and understandeth all our thoughts." "All things are naked and open to the eyes of him with whom we have to do." "Hell and destruction are before him without a covering. How much more the hearts of the children of men!"

7. And in that day shall be discovered every inward working of every human soul; every appetite, passion, inclination, affection, with the various combinations of them, with every temper and disposition that constitute the whole complex character of each individual. So shall it be clearly and infallibly seen, who was righteous, and who unrighteous; and in what degree every action, or person, or character was either good or evil.

8. "Then the King will say to them upon his right hand, Come, ye blessed of My Father. For I was hungry, and ye gave Me meat; thirsty, and ye gave Me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took Me in; naked, and ye clothed me." In like manner, all the good they did upon earth will be recited before men and angels; whatsoever they had done, either in word or deed, in the name, or for the sake, of the Lord Jesus. All their good desires, intentions, thoughts, all their holy dispositions, will also be then remembered; and it will appear, that though they were unknown or forgotten among men, yet God noted them in his book. All their sufferings likewise for the name of Jesus, and for the testimony of a good conscience, will be displayed unto their praise from the righteous Judge, their honor before saints and angels, and the increase of that "far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory."

9. But will their evil deeds too (since, if we take in his whole life, there is not a man on earth who liveth and sinneth, not), will these be remembered in that day, and mentioned in the great congregation? Many believe they will not; and ask, "Would not this imply, that their sufferings were not at an end, even when life ended? -- seeing they

would still have sorrow, and shame, and confusion of face to endure." They ask farther, "How can this be reconciled with God's declaration by the Prophet, -- If the wicked will turn from all his sins that he hath committed, and keep all My statutes, and do that which is lawful and right; all his transgressions that he hath committed, they shall not be once mentioned unto him?" (Ezek. 18:21, 22). How is it consistent with the promise which God has made to all who accept of the gospel covenant, I will forgive their iniquities, and remember their sin no more?" (Jer. 31:34) Or, as the Apostle expresses it, I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and iniquities will I remember no more?" (Heb. 8:12).

10. It may be answered, It is apparently and absolutely necessary, for the full display of the glory of God; for the clear and perfect manifestation of his wisdom, justice, power, and mercy, toward the heirs of salvation; that all the circumstances of their life should be placed in open view, together with all their tempers, and all the desires, thoughts, and intents of their hearts: otherwise, how would it appear out of what a depth of sin and misery the grace of God had delivered them? And, indeed, if the whole lives of all the children of men were not manifestly discovered, the whole amazing contexture of divine providence could not be manifested; nor should we yet be able, in a thousand instances, "to justify the ways of God to man." Unless our Lord's words were fulfilled in their utmost sense, without any restriction or limitation, "There is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; or hid, that shall not be known" (Matt. 10:26); abundance of God's dispensations under the sun would still appear without their reasons. And then only when God hath brought to light all the hidden things of darkness, whosoever were the actors therein, will it be seen that wise and good were all his ways; that he saw through the thick cloud, and governed all things by the wise counsel of his own will; that nothing was left to chance or the caprice of men, but God disposed all strongly and sweetly, and wrought all into one connected chain of justice, mercy, and truth. [166]

11. And in the discovery of the divine perfections, the righteous will rejoice with joy unspeakable; far from feeling any painful sorrow or shame, for any of those past transgressions which were long since

blotted out as a cloud, washed away by the blood of the Lamb. It will be abundantly sufficient for them, that all the transgressions which they had committed shall not be once mentioned unto them to their disadvantage that their sins, and transgressions, and iniquities shall be remembered no more to their condemnation. This is the plain meaning of the promise; and this all the children of God shall find true, to their everlasting comfort.

12. After the righteous are judged, the King will turn to them upon his left hand; and they shall also be judged, every man according to his works. But not only their outward works will be brought into the account, but all the evil words which they have ever spoken; yea, all the evil desires, affections, tempers, which have, or have had, a place in their souls; and all the evil thoughts or designs which were ever cherished in their hearts. The joyful sentence of acquittal will then be pronounced Upon those upon the right hand; the dreadful sentence of condemnation upon those on the left; both of which must remain fixed and unmovable as the throne of God.

III

III. 1. We may, in the Third place, consider a few of the circumstances which will follow the general judgement. And the first is the execution of the sentence pronounced on the evil and on the good: "These shall go away into eternal punishment, and the righteous into life eternal." It should be observed, it is the very same word which is used, both in the former and the latter clause. It follows, that either the punishment lasts for ever, or the reward too will come to an end: -- No, never, unless God could come to an end, or his mercy and truth could fail. "Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father," "and shall drink of those rivers of pleasure which are at God's right hand for evermore." But here all description falls short; all human language fails! Only one who is caught up into the third heaven can have a just conception of it. But even such a one cannot express what he hath seen: these things it is not possible for man to utter. The wicked, meantime, shall be turned into hell, even all the people that forget God. They will be "punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power." They will be

"cast into the lake of fire burning with brimstone," originally "prepared for the devil and his angels;" where they will gnaw their tongues for anguish and pain; they will curse God and look upward. There the dogs of hell -- pride, malice, revenge, rage, horror, despair -- continually devour them. There "they have no rest, day or night, but the smoke of their torment ascendeth for ever and ever!" For "their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched." [167]

2. Then the heavens will be shrivelled up as a parchment scroll, and pass away with a great noise: they will "flee from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and there will be found no place for them" (Rev. 20:11). The very manner of their passing away is disclosed to us by the Apostle Peter: "In the day of God, the heavens, being on fire, shall be dissolved" (2 Pet. 3:12). The whole beautiful fabric will be overthrown by that raging element, the connexion of all its parts destroyed, and every atom torn asunder from the others. By the same, "the earth also, and the works that are therein, shall be burned up" (verse 10). The enormous works of nature, the everlasting hills, mountains that have defied the rage of time, and stood unmoved so many thousand years, will sink down in fiery ruin. How much less will the works of art, though of the most durable kind, the utmost efforts of human industry -- tombs, pillars, triumphal arches, castles, pyramids -- be able to withstand the flaming conqueror! All, all will die, perish, vanish away, like a dream when one awaketh! [168]

3. It has indeed been imagined by some great and good men, that as it requires that same almighty power to annihilate things as to create; to speak into nothing or out of nothing; so no part of, no atom in, the universe, will be totally or finally destroyed. Rather, they suppose that, as the last operation of fire, which we have yet been able to observe, is to reduce into glass what, by a smaller force, it had reduced to ashes; so, in the day God hath ordained, the whole earth, if not the material heavens also, will undergo this change, after which the fire can have no farther power over them. And they believe this is intimated by that expression in the Revelation made to St. John: "Before the throne there was a sea of glass, like unto crystal" (Rev. 4:6). We cannot now either affirm or deny this; but we shall know hereafter.

4. If it be inquired by the scoffers, the minute philosophers, "How can these things be? Whence should come such an immense quantity of fire as would consume the heavens and the whole terraqueous globe?" we would beg leave, first, to remind them, that this difficulty is not peculiar to the Christian system. The same opinion almost universally obtained among the unbigoted Heathens. So one of these celebrated freethinkers speaks, according to the generally received sentiment, -- *Esse quoque in fatis reminiscitur, affore tempus, Quo mare, quo tellus, correptaque regia coeli Ardeat, et mundi moles operosa laboret.* [The following is Dryden's translation of this quotation from Ovid: -- Rememb'ring, in the fates, a time when fire Should to the battlements of heaven aspire; And all the blazing world above should burn, And all the" inferior globe to cinders turn. --EDIT.] But, Secondly, it is easy to answer, even from our slight and superficial acquaintance with natural things, that there are abundant magazines of fire ready prepared, and treasured up against the day of the Lord. How soon may a comet, commissioned by him, travel down from the most distant parts of the universe! And were it to fix upon the earth in its return from the sun, when it is some thousand times hotter than a red-hot cannon ball, who does not see what must be the immediate consequence? But, not to ascend so high as the ethereal heavens, might not the same lightnings which "give shine to the world," if commanded by the Lord of nature, give ruin and utter destruction? Or, to go no farther than the globe itself; who knows what huge reservoirs of liquid fire are from age to age contained in the bowels of the earth? Aetna, Hecla, Vesuvius, and all the other volcanoes that belch out flames and coals of fire, what are they, but so many proofs and mouths of those fiery furnaces; and at the same time so many evidences that God hath in readiness wherewith to fulfil his word? Yea, were we to observe no more than the surface of the earth, and the things that surround us on every side, it is most certain (as a thousand experiments prove, beyond all possibility of denial) that we ourselves, our whole bodies, are full of fire, as well as everything round about us. Is it not easy to make this ethereal fire visible even to the naked eye, and to produce thereby the very same effects on combustible matter, which are produced by culinary fire? Needs there then any more than for God to unloose that secret chain, whereby this irresistible agent is now bound down, and lies quiescent in every particle of matter? And how soon would it tear the universal frame in pieces,

and involve all in one common ruin! [169]

5. There is one circumstance more which will follow the judgement, that deserves our serious consideration: "We look," says the Apostle, "according to his promise, for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness" (2 Pet. 3:13). The promise stands in the prophecy of Isaiah: "Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered" (Isa. 65:17), so great shall the glory of the latter be! These St. John did behold in the visions of God. "I saw," saith he, "a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away" (Rev. 21:1). And only righteousness dwelt therein: accordingly, he adds, "And I heard a great voice from" the third "heaven, saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God" (21:3). Of necessity, therefore, they will all be happy: "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain" (21:4). "There shall be no more curse; but they shall see his face" (21:3, 4), -- shall have the nearest access to, and thence the highest, resemblance of, him. This is the strongest expression in the language of Scripture, to denote the most perfect happiness. "And his name shall be on their foreheads;" they shall be openly acknowledged as God's own property, and his glorious nature shall most visibly shine forth in them. "And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light: and they shall reign for ever and ever."

IV

IV. It remains only to apply the preceding considerations to all who are here before God. And are we not directly led so to do, by the present solemnity, which so naturally points us to that day, when the Lord will judge the world in righteousness? This, therefore, by reminding us of that more awful season, may furnish many lessons of instruction. A few of these I may be permitted just to touch on. May God write them on all our hearts!

1. And, First, how beautiful are the feet of those who are sent by the

wise and gracious providence of God, to execute justice on earth, to defend the injured, and punish the wrongdoer! Are they not the ministers of God to us for good; the grand supporters of the public tranquillity; the patrons of innocence and virtue; the great security of all our temporal blessings? And does not every one of these represent, not only an earthly prince, but the Judge of the earth? Him whose "name is written upon his thigh, King of kings, and Lord of lords?" O that all these sons of the right hand of the Most High may be as holy as he is holy! wise with the wisdom that sitteth by his throne, like him who is the eternal Wisdom of the Father! no respecters of persons, as he is none; but rendering to every man according to his works; like him inflexibly, inexorably just, though pitiful and of tender mercy! So shall they be terrible indeed to them that do evil, as not bearing the sword in vain. So shall the laws of our land have their full use and due honor, and the throne of our King be still established in righteousness.

2. Ye truly honorable men, whom God and the King have commissioned, in a lower degree, to administer justice; may not ye be compared to those ministering spirits who will attend the Judge coming in the clouds? May you, like them, burn with love to God and man! May you love righteousness and hate iniquity! May ye all minister, in your several spheres (such honor hath God given you also to them that shall be heirs of salvation, and to the glory of your great sovereign! May ye remain the establishers of peace, the blessing and ornaments of your country, the protectors of a guilty land, the guardian angels of all that are round about you!

3. You, whose office it is to execute what is given you in charge by him before whom you stand; how nearly are you concerned to resemble those that stand before the face of the Son of Man, those servants of his that do his pleasure, and hearken to the voice of his words! Does it not highly import you, to be as uncorrupt as them? to approve yourselves the servants of God? to do justly, and love mercy? to do to all as ye would they should do to you? So shall that great Judge, under whose eye you continually stand, say to you also, "Well done, good and faithful servants: enter ye into the joy of your Lord!"

4. Suffer me to add a few words to all of you who are at this day

present before the Lord. Should not you bear it in your minds all the day long, that a more awful day is coming? A large assembly this! But what is it to that which every eye will then behold, the general assembly of all the children of men that ever lived on the face of the whole earth? A few will stand at the judgement-seat this day, to be judged touching what shall be laid to their charge; and they are now reserved in prison, perhaps in chains, till they are brought forth to be tried and sentenced. But we shall all, I that speak and you that hear, "stand at the judgement-seat of Christ." And we are now reserved on this earth, which is not our home, in this prison of flesh and blood, perhaps many of us in chains of darkness too, till we are ordered to be brought forth. Here a man is questioned concerning one or two facts, which he is supposed to have committed: there we are to give an account of all our works, from the cradle to the grave; of all our words; of all our desires and tempers, all the thoughts and intents of our hearts; of all the use we have made of our various talents, whether of mind, body, or fortune, till God said, "Give an account of thy stewardship, for thou mayest be no longer steward." In this court, it is possible, some who are guilty may escape for want of evidence; but there is no want of evidence in that court. All men, with whom you had the most secret intercourse, who were privy to all your designs and actions, are ready before your face. So are all the spirits of darkness, who inspired evil designs and assisted in the execution of them. So are all the angels of God; those eyes of the Lord, that run to and fro over all the earth, who watched over your soul, and labored for your good, so far as you would permit. So is your own conscience, a thousand witnesses in one, now no more capable of being either blinded or silenced, but constrained to know and to speak the naked truth, touching all your thoughts, and words, and actions. And is conscience as a thousand witnesses? -- yea, but God is as a thousand consciences! O, who can stand before the face of the great God, even our Savior Jesus Christ! See! See! He cometh! He maketh the clouds his chariots! He rideth upon the wings of the wind! A devouring fire goeth before him, and after him a flame burneth! See! He sitteth upon his throne, clothed with light as with a garment, arrayed with majesty and honor! Behold, his eyes are as a flame of fire, his voice as the sound of many waters! How will ye escape? Will ye call to the mountains to fall, on you, the rocks to cover you? Alas, the mountains themselves, the rocks, the earth, the heavens, are just ready to flee away! Can ye

prevent the sentence? Wherewith? With all the substance of thy house, with thousands of gold and, silver? Blind wretch! Thou camest naked from thy mother's womb, and more naked into eternity. Hear the Lord, the Judge! "Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." Joyful sound! How widely different from that voice which echoes, through the expanse of heaven, "Depart, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels!" And who is he that can prevent or retard the full execution of either sentence? Vain hope! Lo, hell is moved from beneath to receive those who are ripe for destruction. And the everlasting doors lift up their heads, that the heirs of glory may come in! [170]

5. "What manner of persons then ought we to be, in all holy conversation and godliness!" We know it cannot be long before the Lord will descend with the voice of the archangel, and the trumpet of God; when every one of us shall appear before him, and give account of his own works. "Wherefore, beloved, seeing ye look for these things," seeing ye know he will come and will not tarry, "be diligent, that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot and blameless." Why should ye not? Why should one of you be found on the left hand at his appearing? He willeth not that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance; by repentance, to faith in a bleeding Lord; by faith, to spotless love, to the full image of God renewed in the heart, and producing all holiness of conversation. Can you doubt of this, when you remember, the Judge of all is likewise the Savior of all? Hath he not bought you with his own blood, that ye might not perish, but have everlasting life? O make proof of his mercy, rather than his justice; of his love, rather than the thunder of his power! He is not far from every one of us; and he is now come, not to condemn, but to save the world he standeth in the midst! Sinner, doth he not now, even now, knock at the door of thy heart? O that thou mayest know, at least in this thy day, the things that belong unto thy peace! O that ye may now give yourselves to him who gave himself for you, in humble faith, in holy, active, patient love! So shall ye rejoice with exceeding joy in his day, when he cometh in the clouds of heaven.

Copyright © 2011-2014 WordsOfWesley.com. All rights reserved.

Proper Cite: John Wesley. Sermon 15 "The Great Assize" in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson via WordsOfWesley.com (Accessed Nov 08,2024)