The Books Were Opened

# Scripture: Rev. 20:12

# Key thought: Remembering that we are accountable to God motivates our daily choices.

# Intro:

I read a joke that went something like this:

The angel of the Lord contacted the editors of four major US newspapers, identified himself, and gave them this message; “God says the world will end tomorrow!”

The New York Times carried a Front-page headline: **THE WORLD WILL END TOMORROW, RELIABLE SOURCE SAYS.**

The Wall Street Journal’s front-page headline read: **WORLD ENDS TOMORROW: MARKET PLUNGES**

The headline in USA Today read: **WE’RE GONE!**

The headline in the Washington Post read: **WORLD ENDS TOMORROW; CONGRESS APPROVES TERM-LIMITS AND SCHOOL PRAYER**

Well, what is your reaction to hearing the Scripture that was read this morning?

## Not ominous but motivating

When I first came up with the sermon title, “And the Books Were Opened,” which is a quote from the text, my wife’s immediate reply was, “sounds ominous.” I suppose that could be true. And it probably accurately assesses how we often feel when confronted with teachings about the second coming of Christ or the judgment.

But that is not really my intention today– to sound ominous. Nor do I think that is the intention of the book of Revelation. Rather, I want to explore how the idea of God’s “books” is intended to be motivating for us as Christians.

I need to say from the start, that we cannot be positive whether the Scripture intends to be completely literal about the concept of “books” that God keeps. It may be- in fact, I consider it very likely- that the word “books” here in Revelation is a picture word taken from our experience, to help us understand something. God chose the language metaphor through John to remind us strongly of our accountability before God.

# Our struggle to stay motivated

Palm Sunday and Easter are huge high points for us in our spiritual journeys of discipleship. Some of you have made new commitments during the Palm Sunday and Easter season. The question that immediately faces us after such commitments is this; “How do we stay motivated?”

There are many answers to that question. Probably part of the answer is to recognize that staying motivated is an issue. It’s so easy for us to settle into a comfortable level of Christianity; maybe we should call it a minimum level of Christianity. As we discovered during the Lenten and Easter series, it is hard for us to think about self-denial rather than self-accommodation. It is hard for us to put others first. We easily slide back into a focus on comfort and pleasure and ease. And the busyness we face helps us neglect our spiritual side too.

1. One answer to staying motivated is what you are doing this morning. You have taken time to come apart and worship God with other believers. You’re doing what the Bible tells us to do.

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Heb 10:23-25 NIV

1. A second source of motivation is God’s love for us and for others. As Paul put it;

Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. 2 Cor 5:14-15

One of the big reasons for our Lenten journey to the cross is to understand a little more of how much God loves us. Then because we know we are loved, we are motivated to love others for Jesus’ sake.

1. A third answer to our motivational challenge is to remember that this life is a pilgrimage headed for an ultimate destination. Paul expressed this truth by reminding us that we are people whose primary citizenship is in heaven rather than in this world (Philippians 3:20, 21). This sense of pilgrimage is most perfectly captured again in Hebrews as it describes the great people of faith in the Old Testament especially Abraham.

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. Heb 11:13-16 NIV

1. But there is one more very important motivation for us that I want to talk about today. I am reminded of it by the text we read this morning and especially by the phrase in that text, “And the books were opened.” It doesn’t tell us how many books. Only one is mentioned by name, “The Book of Life” (Rev. 20:12). As we come to this text, it is important to remember from the outset that Revelation is a motivational book. Its overall purpose is to help a persecuted church keep on keeping on, to have “patient endurance” in the face of very difficult times and unjust circumstances. So, in looking at this passage as a source of motivation for our everyday Christian lives, we are on the same wavelength with John.

Think about it this way: When you know company is coming, you clean the living room. Now it needed that extra cleaning anyway, but usually it just happens that you delay until someone is coming. Or take a work illustration. Suppose you are a salesperson and the company you work for has issued a challenge goal for its sales staff to meet by this June 1. Now you had every intention of selling that much anyway, but now you hustle to get it done before the deadline.

**There is a leadership saying, “People do what you inspect, not what you expect.”**

It is human nature that we need a future reason to be highly motivated to do what we need to do. And it is human nature to do something that we know someone is watching.

Revelation’s picture of God’s books being opened provides for us such a motivational boost for our lives. We need this motivation.

The strong purpose of this word from God about the books being opened at the final judgment is to remind us of our accountability before him for our daily decisions.

Jesus warned us about such a coming judgment several times during his ministry. He warned us of the life and death nature of this final reckoning.

“Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned. John 5:28-29 NIV

He warned us of the thoroughness of our accountability.

But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.” Matt 12:36-37

Jesus said this about our words because he knew that sooner or later, our words betray what is in our hearts.

So, since the day of judgment is established and we all have to face it; it would be good for us to learn about these books that will be opened.

**One word of caution**—I do not think we should worry ourselves over details that are not revealed to us concerning the final judgements. Will there be more than one judgement? Who will be at which one? Which verses refer to which judgment? In my view, such questions often lead to speculation that is beyond the revelation that we are given. Especially, and most pointedly, they are beyond the purposes of the revelation that we are given. These passages are given to us to warn us and motivate us, not to satisfy our endless curiosity about the future.

So, let’s talk about the purposes of God’s books .

# The contents and purposes of God's books

We don’t know much about the details of these books, but we are clearly told the purposes of the records that God is keeping. And we can deduce their general content as it relates to their purposes. That is really all we need to know.

## The contents of God’s books are records of things relating to our lives on this earth.

Again, remember that the idea of a book may be a picture for our sake. God is using a language picture that we relate to easily to help us understand a spiritual concept. The first message we need to receive through the concept of God’s “books” is that God is aware of and keeps track of our daily lives. Our lives are an open book to him-pun intentional!

**I saw a Family Circus cartoon once.** One of the little boys in the family had run in quickly to his bed and was kneeling down at his bedside for evening prayer. The caption was, “Before you hear it from her, let me tell you what really happened.” I like the cartoon because it reminds us that even though we are accountable to one another, and to authorities in this life, our ultimate accountability is before God.

Consider the following Scriptures from Psalms;

God looks down from heaven on all mankind
to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. Ps 53:2 NIV

The Lord is in his holy temple; the Lord is on his heavenly throne.
He observes everyone on earth; his eyes examine them. Ps 11:4 NIV

Now a word from God through the prophets Hosea and Jeremiah;

Hos 13:12 “ The guilt of Ephraim is stored up; his sins are kept on record.”

My eyes are on all their ways; they are not hidden from me, nor is their sin concealed from my eyes. Jer 16:17 NIV

Again, helping us remember God’s knowledge of our ways is the first purpose of the Bible’s reference to God’s “books.” They speak of the record of our lives before God. Now when we think about it, this documentation could be an awful thing. For all of us are quite aware of all the imperfections and sins that are part of our past.

## Forgiveness and “blotting out”

But it is important that we remember one more thing about God’s bookkeeping. There is an important exception to God’s perfect records.

In the times of the Bible, things that were written could not be erased. Instead, when a change needed to be made, the old record was blotted out. Blotting something out meant that ink was put over that part, so it could not be read. It was essentially gone from the record. Now apply that knowledge to the Bible. The Bible is crystal clear that our God is a God who forgives. Because of this, in words reflecting the writing practices of the Bible era, God repeatedly in the Bible describes his record-keeping as containing sections that are blotted out because he has forgiven the things that had been recorded and does not want to remember them anymore. For example, consider this text:

“I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake,
and remembers your sins no more. Isa 43:25 NIV

So, here is the take-away for us today. In the record-keeping of God for our lives, the sins we have confessed to God and repented of are not on the records any more. Praise God. They will never be brought up against us. When the “books” are opened, they will not be on the record.

## The contents of the books determined the life and death matters of eternal judgment.

The Bible says that “The Lord knows those who are his” (2 Tim. 2:18). The “Book of Life” is the expression of that truth here in Revelation. It has a life and death purpose. Jesus repeatedly spoke in his parables of a dividing that would come when He judged the world—the sheep and the goats; the wheat and the tares; those who have done good and those who have done evil. The “Book of Life” is key to that dividing.

During his time on earth, Jesus spoke about the fact that God was particularly interested in how people treated God’s Son.

The Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him.

“Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life.” John 5:22-24 NIV

How we respond to Jesus’ invitation to follow him is crucial for our eternal destiny.

In the beginning of his Gospel record John writes,

“In Him was life and that life was the light of all mankind!” (John 1:4 NIV)

In the third chapter of John’s Gospel we read;

Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. John 3:18 NRSV

Here in Revelation, the results of our decisions about Jesus result in our names either being written the Lamb’s Book of Life or not being found there.

The Jews asked Jesus bluntly, “What must we do to do the works God requires?”

Jesus replied succinctly, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.” (John 6:28, 29).

It makes perfect sense in connection with John 3:16

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. John 3:16 NIV

**Caution two:**

Do not spend time thinking about those who have not heard of Jesus, the Bible principle is that they will be judged according to the light they had. A just God has made ample provision for them. Your concern is for you. Have you made a confession of faith? Have you –as St. Peter put it –made “every effort to confirm your calling and election?” (2 Peter 1:10 NIV) by acknowledging your faith in Jesus before others and putting your faith into practice in your life?

Three weeks ago, 14 people publicly confessed their faith in Jesus declaring to all the world that they had decided to follow Jesus. That is the kind of decision I am talking about. As pastor, I am sure there were varying degrees of spiritual understanding present up front that day. But God is, first of all, looking for a willingness to learn and a heart that wants to follow. All 14 people were in some way confessing that on Palm Sunday. Such decisions to follow Jesus do not always begin as public ones. Often, they are very private thoughts at first. But eventually we are prompted to confess out loud that we are a follower of Jesus.

 If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. As Scripture says, “Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame.”
Rom 10:9-11 NIV

The Book of Life represents God’s eternal record of our decision to follow Jesus. Is your name written there? If you have opened your heart to Jesus, repenting of your sin, decided to follow him and acknowledged that fact publicly, according to God’s promises, it is there.

But if you are still delaying – looking for a more convenient time – then your name is not yet in that crucial record and you are living dangerously.

## The contents of the books determined just rewards in the next life.

The final purpose of the records of which the Scripture speaks is the one we intuitively expect -- to determine just rewards. The Scripture is careful to remind us that God is a God of justice and even though people do not always get what they deserve in this world, someday they will. God will see to it that they do. You and I know good and self-sacrificing people who never saw the fruit of their loving actions. We hear of scoundrels who seem to strike it rich and enjoy great benefits. But God is not fooled. God’s justice will not be mocked. This is a message that our society is sorely in need of today. Good people become discouraged because no one reminds them that God sees every one of their selfless deeds. Evildoers live as if they were accountable to no one. They even commit murder and suicide as if death were the end of their accountability. It is not. Death will be only the beginning of their just deserts. Listen to the assurance of the Psalmist.

“Surely you will reward each person according to what he has done.” Psalms 62:12 NIV

Hear the warning of the prophet.

Tell the righteous it will be well with them, for they will enjoy the fruit of their deeds.
 Woe to the wicked! Disaster is upon them!
They will be paid back for what their hands have done. Isa 3:10-11 NIV

Bishop William H. Willimon in United Methodist Beliefs

 Wesleyan tradition emphasizes God's transforming love that makes us coworkers in God's reign. God creates us not only to receive salvation but to participate in it by giving us responsibility.

Judgment is linked to reign. The One on the throne is not only the royal ruler of the world but also righteous judge. That's one reason that in the Apostles Creed we say that Christ is "seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty from whence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead."
When we celebrate communion, we join in the acclamation "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again!" According to Scripture, everyone will be resurrected (Romans 14:10); all will be assembled before the righteous gaze of God; then will come the judgment:
"for all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil… We ourselves are well known to God" (two Corinthians 5:10 – 11). (P. 103)

Jesus spoke clearly about judgement according to our works.

“Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned. John 5:28, 29 NIV

So, God is not looking only at how we have responded to Jesus, he is also looking at how we have lived. As he taught about this in Matthew he described his second coming as like a shepherd separating the sheep and the goats (Matt. 24:31ff). The criteria for separation in Jesus’ description was how we had treated those in need. This is why Jesus said that there are two great commandments. The first is “Love the Lord Your God” the second is “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:37, 38). The second has to do with our good works.

## Good works will be remembered

Ultimately, the concept of God’s “books” reminds us that God will be inspecting our good works. These will include both our religious works of prayer and devotion that have to do with our love for God and our works of compassion and charity to others which reflect our love for others.

 “Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honored his name.” Mal 3:16 NIV

When it comes to our deeds of service, not even one small act of service to others will be forgotten.

“Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person as a righteous person will receive a righteous person’s reward. And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward.”
Matt 10:40-42 NIV

**Remember, the phrase, “And the books were opened!” is intended to motivate us!**

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# Conclusion

## This knowledge motivates us:

1. To be sure our name is written in the “Book of Life.”
2. To be “eager to do what is good” (Titus 2:14)
* Motivates us to accountability in matters of integrity
* Motivates us to accountability in matters of compassion
* Motivates us to accountability in matters of speech
* Motivates us to accountability in matters of time
* Motivates us to accountability in matters of using our abilities
* Motivates us to accountability in matters of money
* Motivates us to accountability in matters of influence