

# Jesus and the Judgment

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For just about all of us, the thought of appearing in court is an intimidating experience. I myself have only been in court on my own behalf once, when I didn't put the new registration sticker on my car before a cop noticed that the old one was out of date. I had the new sticker, so I figured I would show up in traffic court to get the ticket dismissed rather than pay \$150. Even though the only crime I had committed was inattention, it was still a little unnerving to go to the courtroom, wait until my name was called, and then stand before the judge and explain what had happened.

However, whatever apprehension I might have felt in traffic court is nothing compared to what we will feel when we stand before the throne of God on the last day. God knows everything we've ever done, His justice is perfect and absolute, and if He finds us wanting, the penalty we will pay is an eternity away from Him. In fact, friends, the thought of having to give that account on our own should fill us with terror. Thankfully, we don't have to answer for the lives we've lived without a Friend. This morning, then, let's consider the crucial relationship between Jesus and the judgment.

## The Inevitability of Judgment

Certainly, the day of judgment wouldn't be such a frightening thing if we could somehow avoid it, but in reality, judgment is inevitable. Neither we nor this world itself are going to continue forever. This is **IMPLIED** by the very nature of reality itself. Let's look together at the very first verse in the Bible, Genesis 1:1. We don't realize it today, but back in the 1930's, when scientists began collecting the information that indicated that the universe began with some sort of Big Bang, that met with a whole lot of opposition from the scientific community. They felt that the Big Bang, in which everything was created from nothing, logically implied a supernatural creation for the natural universe and generally sounded much too much like Genesis 1. Scientists since have done their best to paper over this dilemma, but it still remains. If the universe was created, it was created for a purpose, and it will only continue to exist until it fulfills that purpose. In this physical creation, everything that has a beginning has an end too. Even stars die, given enough time. It follows, then, that at some point the universe itself will pass from existence, and all that we know will be gone.

In fact, this event is **PREDICTED** by the Scripture itself. Let's consider 2 Peter 3:10. It's fair to say that the universe began with a bang, and it's going to go out with a bang too. This will be no slow death in which the cold remains of stars drift through space for eternity. Instead, everything is going to be consumed at once in the most spectacular explosion that existence has ever seen. Once God is through destroying what He has built, there won't even be remnants left. The elements themselves will be destroyed in the fury, and not so much as a single solitary quark will escape the eye of its Creator. People in the environmental movement are very concerned about protecting our planet and preserving it for our grandchildren. I certainly believe that we should be good stewards of the earth, but ultimately, that's a waste of time. No matter how well or how poorly we maintain it, we are still not going to succeed in destroying ourselves or it before the Lord returns, and once He does return, there won't even be cinders left of the ground He once walked. Each one of us will continue past that point, so it is the height of foolishness to tie our fate to the fate of Earth.

However, even though every human being is eternal, even though every one of us will still exist when the physical creation is no more, that doesn't mean we'll see the last day in the state in which we are now. We also have to take into account the likelihood of **OUR END** in this life. Solomon describes it in Ecclesiastes 12:5-7. This is certainly not our favorite thing to think about, but it's true. None of us have invulnerable mortal bodies. That's why they're mortal. Over time, they will degrade, work less and less well, until they fall apart completely. For the Christian, this is not the disaster that it is for the atheist. We have the hope of life even after our deaths. However, this still should be a solemn thought. Even Jesus didn't regard the prospect of His death with joy, and He knew for a fact there was something beyond the veil. We can use our time on earth however we please, but we must acknowledge that that time is limited. This very limitation tells us how foolish it is to spend our days on things that will have no meaning once we pass on. Instead, the wise course is to use our lives to prepare for what will happen after those lives are over, so we don't miss what's truly important.

The Scripture speaks, though, not only of our individual passing, but of **THE END FOR ALL** the human race. Paul predicts that moment in 1 Thessalonians 5:2-3. In a sense, those people who think they're going to live forever may actually be right. It could be that they won't experience earthly death. However, everyone who doesn't die is going to have to deal with the return of the Lord Jesus, the day of judgment, and the end of the physical universe right in the middle of their lifespans. We don't know when that day is coming, but sooner or later, it's going to come, when everyone least expects it. Nobody's going to be able to hop in their personal starship and flee to another galaxy. Nobody's going to be able to dig a fallout shelter where they can hide until the ruckus is over. When Jesus comes, He's going to be coming for everybody, whether they greet His advent with joy or not. On that day, it's all going to be over. There will be no more physical evidence of the human race, and indeed, there will be no more physical evidence of anything.

On that day, there will be **ONE OUTCOME** for everybody, one fate that we encounter. John depicts it in Revelation 20:12. What a strange and momentous gathering that will be! People who were teenagers and saw the Lord

returning in the clouds will be lined up next to the dead from the ancient world, those who knew Abraham, Noah, and even Adam himself. Hittites will be mingled with Argentines, ancient Romans will be standing next to those who lived and died in the Soviet Union. There will be people there who will be as different from us as you can possibly be and still be human, but despite all of those differences, there will be one overwhelming similarity. We will all be judged according to the deeds that we had done in the body. There will be no need for witnesses because God will already know everything about all of us. The prosecuting attorney will be Satan himself. In fact, in the Old Testament, Satan is most commonly described as “the Satan”, with “Satan” being a title that means “accuser”. We can rest assured that this diabolical prosecutor will do everything he can to see us and everyone else eternally condemned to hell. We will be up there on our own, before the awful majesty of the Father, and whether or not we have help there depends on what we do here.

### **Our Need for Jesus**

This sobering scenario highlights our need for Jesus. Every one of us is going to have to face the accusations of Satan on that awe-inspiring stage, and every one of us is going to have the same problem, **THE PROBLEM OF SIN**. Paul emphasizes this in Romans 3:19-20. Here, he is speaking specifically of those who lived under the Law of Moses, but the same principle applies to everyone. None of us on our own are going to be able to make the defense against Satan that we need to make to save our souls. If I were up there on my own, and I didn't have any help, here's how things would go. The devil would ask, “So, Matt, have you ever lied?” I would have to answer “Yes.” “Have you ever been unrighteously angry?” “Yes.” “Have you ever worshiped God with your lips while your heart was far from Him?” “Yes.” And so on. In that high-stakes trial at the end of time, I have got a serious problem. I am guilty of all the charges that Satan would bring against me. I wouldn't be able to lie about it. I wouldn't be able to deflect my guilt. Instead, I would have to acknowledge that I had sinned against God and done the things that His law punishes with death. Death for me, and death for all of us, is what would be fair. Because of our transgression, on our own, we deserve it.

Next to the thought of eternity in hell, the oblivion of the atheists starts to look pretty good! However, there is another option for us, and it exists because of **WHAT JESUS DID**. Isaiah describes this in poetic fashion in Isaiah 53:5-6. In our judicial system, as in most judicial systems, we have a rule. Only one person can be condemned for a particular crime. If a man is murdered, the police catch the guy they think did it, and the guy is tried, sentenced, and executed, the police can't say six months later, “Actually, we think this guy over here did it instead, so we're going to try him for the same crime.” Instead, once a man is convicted, the books are closed on that crime. It is assumed that the guilty have been punished and justice has been served. What Jesus did for us, in His suffering and death on the cross, is suffer the punishment that was due to us because of our sin. Jesus didn't deserve to die on His own account. He was sinless. He was not subject to death, either in this life or the life to come. However, he volunteered to take the death we deserved.

This noble action of Jesus has three very important spiritual consequences for us. First, it gives us **FREEDOM**. Paul explains why quite well in Romans 8:34. Let's imagine again that grand courtroom scene on the day of judgment. Here I am, standing before the throne of God, the Judge of all, but this time, instead of being up there on my own, I have help. I have Jesus, whom the Bible says will be my *paracletos*, or defense attorney. Once again, the devil starts in on all his accusations. He asks, “Matt, have you ever lied?” This time, though, before I can answer, Jesus interrupts. He says, “Father, the devil isn't allowed to present evidence about that crime, because someone has already died for it. In fact, I died.” God says, “That's right. Satan, do you have any sins to accuse Matt of for which Jesus hasn't already paid the price?” The devil will have to say, “No, I don't,” and God will say to me, “I find you not guilty of all the charges brought against you.” Don't get me wrong, friends. This will not be the outcome I deserve. I will still be the person who lied and was unrighteously angry and worshiped thoughtlessly and did all the other things I've done. However, God's holy court won't be able to condemn me for any of those things, because Jesus took on Himself the punishment for all of them. Through the mercy of His great sacrifice, I will be able to go free instead of being sentenced to eternal punishment.

Even in this life, with all of its struggles, the knowledge that Jesus is on our side should give us **HOPE** for the life to come. The Hebrews writer describes this hope in Hebrews 6:18-19. In context, the two immutable things in this passage are first of all God's promise that Jesus will intercede for us as our high priest, and second, the oath that God swore to confirm Jesus' priesthood. There's a lot of complicated Hebrews stuff there that we're not going to get into this morning, but the point is that God has made our hope redundantly secure. His promise by itself would have been enough to give us confidence. However, He swore to that promise too. There is no way that God could go back on that, even if He wanted to. As long as we meet His terms, we are certain to find salvation in Jesus. Calvinists like to make a big deal about the sureness of their salvation, because of their doctrine of once-saved always-saved. In reality, once-saved, always-saved doesn't offer any security at all, because no Calvinist can truly know whether he is one of the elect or not. He can never be sure that he was saved in the first place. By contrast, if we have obeyed the gospel in the first place, we can be certain that we have been forgiven, and if we continue to trust in Jesus, we can be certain that He will deliver us.

Finally, of course, the outcome of this freedom and hope is **ETERNAL LIFE**. Jesus Himself says this in John 17:2. Everybody whom God has given Jesus will receive eternal life from His hand. To us, this might seem kind of

Calvinistic, until we remember what 2 Thessalonians 2 says on the subject. According to Paul there, the way that God chooses those who belong to Jesus is by calling everyone through the gospel. Anyone who responds to that gospel call becomes part of Jesus' chosen few. God does not deprive us of our freedom to choose once we become Christians. As long as we have life, it is always possible for us to turn our backs on the Lord and fall from His grace. However, if we, as our brother Jesse likes to say, "remain faithful to Him right to the end of the way", then eternal life will be the certain outcome. Instead of having to spend forever apart from God and the light of His love, we will get to spend that eternity gathered together in His presence, filled with a joy that will never pass away. In this life, the bad times certainly make the promise of heaven sweeter, but so do the good times. When I rejoice in my brethren here, whether we're worshipping together, or studying together, or even merely visiting together, those things are merely a shadow of eternity.

For most Christians, the presence of Jesus in our lives is one of the most important elements of those lives. He gives us peace and joy that no one else can know. However, we will only truly understand the impact of His sacrifice when we see Him plead our case on the day of judgment. Having an ally like that when we need Him most is truly priceless, but it's a gift He offers to us freely. Let's reflect on what that means for us as we partake of the Lord's Supper.

## Our Response

However, if we want to enjoy eternity in heaven, we have to prepare for that on earth. In the last portion of this lesson, we're going to look at five ways that the Scripture says we should respond to the reality of judgment. The first of these is that we should **REMEMBER**. Paul makes this point in a seemingly innocuous way in Romans 13:11. One of the hymns that I was delighted to see in our new hymnals is a hymn that is based on this very verse. It's #716, and the title is, "One Sweetly Solemn Thought". Its first and last verses read as follows:

*One sweetly solemn thought  
Comes to me o'er and o'er:  
Today I'm nearer to my home  
Than e'er I've been before.*

*Be Thou near when my feet  
Are slipping o'er the brink,  
For it may be I'm nearer home,  
Much nearer than I think.*

Puts a different spin on the verse we just finished reading, doesn't it? The reason why we can confidently say that salvation is nearer every day is because every day brings us one day closer either to our deaths or to the Lord's return and the destruction of the creation. It's great to be closer to heaven, but it's sobering to consider the in-between stuff. However, we have to consider it. If we forget, if we fall into the trap of believing that this life is going to continue indefinitely, we are certain to live for the world and not for God. Instead, we always need to keep in the back of our minds the realization that eternity is near, maybe much nearer than we think, and we need to be prepared for it.

Second, we ought to respond to judgment by **LIVING GODLY**. This is evident from Peter's rhetorical question in 2 Peter 3:11. Notice that this is a different response than the atheistic conclusion that Paul repeats in 1 Corinthians 15. In that chapter, Paul describes the atheist as saying, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!" If death is all there is, that is the correct conclusion. If we will have this life only, we should squeeze every drop of pleasure out of it that we can. However, if this life isn't all there is, if we must contemplate not only death but also judgment and eternity, that calls for a very different response. If those things are real too, life can no longer be about seeking pleasure in disregard of God's commandments. Those few short years of sensuality will cost us eternity with Him, and that's a horrible trade. Instead, the reality of judgment calls us to the holy and godly life. Only that life can find favor with God. Only that life can spare us from disaster when we are called to account for all the things we have done.

Third, once we acknowledge not merely the fact of judgment, but our own nearness to it, it will teach us to **BE GENTLE**. This is the point that Paul is making in Philippians 4:5. All of us understand that the circumstances of life change our perspective. For example, because Zoë is two, Lauren and I both spend a great deal of time correcting her and trying to teach her proper behavior. That means that sometimes, it feels like our days are an unending repetition of "No, Zoë, don't touch that." "Zoë, put that down!" and the ever-popular, "Zoë Diane, you put that down right this instant, or you're going to get a swat!" Now, let's say that, God forbid, we learned that Zoë had terminal cancer, and that she likely only had a week or two to live. If that's the situation, am I going to be quite as hard-line as I am now? No way! I'm going to do everything I can to treat her gently, to get as much as I can out of the short time we have left.

What Paul wants us to understand here is that all of us only have a short time here with one another. Next to eternity, this life is the blink of an eye. Death and judgment are right around the corner for all of us. When we grasp that

we have that hanging over our heads, does it make sense to be a hardliner about anything? We can afford to be meek. We can afford to be gentle in our dealings with others, because nothing in this life is worth getting worked up about.

This is only a part of the encouragement that the reality of judgment gives us to **LOVE**. John explores the connection between love and the judgment in 1 John 4:17-18. More than anything else, God wants us to love Him and love one another. That's why those are the first and second commandments. God is the perfect expression of love, and Jesus during His time on earth demonstrated perfectly what love in a human being would look like. In our Christian walk, then, if we are becoming more like Christ as we should, we are necessarily also perfected in love. If we know this about ourselves, if we see Christ and His love in our actions in ever-increasing quantities, what reason would we have to fear? On the other hand, if we don't see the love of Christ in ourselves, then we have every reason to be worried.

The point that John makes here makes the Christian life very simple. All we have to ask ourselves is, "Is the love of Christ growing in me?" If it is, we're on the right track. Of course, we don't get to invent our own definition of love. We have to use God's definition, which is composed of the entire law of Christ. It is loving to be righteous. However, we need to pay attention also to the things that anybody would say are loving. Are we more considerate of God, of our brother, of our neighbor, and even of our enemy, than we were a year ago? The love of Christ isn't some abstract intellectual thing. Instead, it's a love that we live, and it's a love that should be evident in our lives.

Finally, we must **BELIEVE**. Paul highlights the importance of faith in Romans 4:4-5. It is absolutely true that we must work on remembering the judgment, and on living righteously, being gentle, and loving in preparation for it. However, our preparation will never be wholly effective. It will never even be mostly effective. We cannot rely on ourselves to justify ourselves simply because we're Christians now and we know what we ought to do. We must rely on Christ Jesus to justify the ungodly. Without faith, we will never save ourselves through any of those other things. However, when we trust in God to justify us according to His mercy and the covenant that He has made with us, that is something we can place our hope in. How wonderful it is that when we face a future event as daunting as the day of judgment, that we can trust in Jesus to take care of us!