

The Day of Judgment

“Let the heavens rejoice ... the earth be glad ... the field be joyful, and all that is therein: ... all the trees of the wood shall rejoice before the Lord. For he cometh ... to judge the earth ... with righteousness, and the people with his truth.” —Psalm 96:11-13

The teaching of the Bible pertaining to a future day of judgment for all mankind is both reassuring and hope-inspiring. It is consistent with the invitation in our text for all to rejoice that the Lord comes to “judge the world with righteousness and the people with his truth.” The Apostle Paul affirmed the coming of this day when speaking on Mars’ Hill. He told the people that God has appointed a day in which “he will judge the world in righteousness” by Jesus Christ, and that he had “given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.”—Acts 17:31

The judgment day which the Lord has provided in his plan of salvation is more than a time when rewards will be given to the righteous and punishments meted out to the wicked. It will also be a period of probation, during which the people will have an opportunity, based upon full knowledge of the issues involved, to choose between obedience to the Lord and disobedience, between righteousness and unrighteousness.

This means that the judgment day is not an ordinary day of twenty-four hours, but, as the Bible teaches, an entire age, a thousand years long. It is, in fact, the same thousand years during which Christ reigns over earth, for he will be judge as well as King. The faithful followers of Jesus during this age will be associate kings with him during that thousand years, and they will also share with him in the work of judging the world.—Rev. 20:4; I Cor. 6:2

These beautiful and harmonious teachings of the Bible are concealed by the erroneous view that the eternal destiny of every individual is irrevocably decided by God at the moment of death. There is no scriptural support for this thought (except as it relates to those who accept Christ, and consecrate their lives to divine service, in this Gospel Age).

On the contrary, Jesus definitely stated that those who do not accept his teachings are not judged now, but later. “If any man hear my words, and believe not, I judge him not ... the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day.” (John 12:47,48) How beautifully this harmonizes with the promise in our text that in that happy judgment day of the future the people will be judged by the “truth,” for the words of Jesus are certainly the truth.

The Present Judgment Day

Jesus’ statement that those who do not now believe his words are not judged implies that those who do believe and become his followers do come into judgment at the present time. This is indeed true. But to appreciate its full implications it is necessary to realize that the word “judgment” as used scripturally in this connection denotes more than merely the passing of sentence; that it includes also the thought of a trial which leads up to a sentence.

Thus the Christian is spoken of in the Bible as being on trial now. Peter speaks of “the trial of your faith” and says that it is “much more precious than of gold that perisheth.” (I Pet. 1:7) He also wrote, “Think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you.” (I Pet. 4:12) Clearly, the trial of the Christian is severe. But the reward is correspondingly great. “Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.”—Rev. 2:10

After mentioning the Christian's "fiery trial" or judgment, Peter explains further: "The time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the Gospel of God? And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?" (I Pet. 4:17,18) This text clearly establishes that the present age is a time of judgment for believers, "the house of God."

But this is only the beginning of the Lord's judgment work. Peter asks, "Where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear [for judgment]?" In this text the apostle does not answer his own question, and some conclude there is no future trial for unbelievers, and they will appear in a place of eternal torture.

But Jesus answered differently. As cited above, he said those who hear, and believe not, are passed over for the present, and will be judged by his "word" in "the last day." (John 12:47,48) In this wonderful assurance the Master makes it definite that the judgment of unbelievers does not occur in this life, that no decision is now reached as to their eternal destiny and will not be until "the last day."

Nor does the expression "last day" refer to the last day of an individual's present life. The same expression was used by Martha when, concerning her brother Lazarus, she said, "I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day." (John 11:24) Notice that the "last day" is at the time of the resurrection. It is the thousand-year day of Christ's reign, and of the judgment—the last great day, or period, in the divine plan for the redemption and recovery of the human race from sin and death.

From the texts already quoted it is apparent that only consecrated followers of the Master are now on trial for life. There is no second trial period for these, and if we fail to note that the scriptures which establish this fact apply only to Christians, we might easily suppose that there is no probation for anyone other than in the present life.

But no one can be on trial for life while still under condemnation. And that is the position of all who have not accepted Christ as their Savior and consecrated themselves to do God's will. Believers, on the other hand, upon the basis of their faith, come out from the condemnation which came upon man through father Adam. In their new standing before the Lord they have "justification of life," in which there is "no condemnation."—Rom. 5:18; 8:1

The significance of this as related to the judgment day is revealed by Jesus when he said, "He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath [by faith] everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation [Greek, *krisis*, meaning judgment]; but is passed from death unto life." (John 5:24) This tells us plainly that believers, by faith, now pass from death unto life and will not come into judgment in the future; their judgment or trial day is now.

This is a great truth which must be considered if we are to understand the purpose of the world's judgment day, and its results. For example, it precludes the view that it is a time when sinners will be separated from saints, with the separation based upon decisions previously reached when each one died; for Jesus emphasizes that the "saints," his true followers, will not appear in that future judgment at all.

In the Resurrection

As already quoted, Jesus said that those who believe pass from death unto life. This, of course, is upon the basis of faith. From God's standpoint these are no longer under condemnation. It is these whom Jesus refers to in John 5:29, where he says that those who have done good shall "come forth ... to the resurrection of life." Their judgment time is passed, and in the resurrection they are

rewarded with the “glory and honor and immortality” which they diligently sought “through patient continuance in well doing.”—Rom. 2:7

Those Who Have Done Evil

Jesus assures us that the resurrection is not only for those who “have done good,” for he says that all who are in the graves shall hear his voice and come forth. (John 5:28) However, as the next verse declares, only those who have done good will come forth to a “resurrection of life,” for those who have “done evil” come forth “to a resurrection of judgment,” as the Revised Version puts it. The Greek word used by Jesus is *krisis*, and the common version mistranslates it “damnation.”

The word *krisis* in the Greek language means the same as our English word “crisis.” It denotes a crucial testing time, or experience. This crucial test of Christians is in the present life, and if they pass it successfully they come forth to life in the resurrection. But all others come forth “to a resurrection of judgment,” that is, to their judgment or trial day. For them, the great crisis in which their eternal destiny is decided will take place after they are awakened from the sleep of death.

The age of probation for the world will in a sense be the second judgment for the human race, the first one having been in the Garden of Eden. That was the judgment day of our first parents, and the result was shared by all mankind. In that trial, or crisis, Adam disobeyed divine law and was sentenced to death. Through heredity, his children shared his penalty. As the Apostle Paul wrote, “By the offense of one, judgment came upon all men to condemnation.”—Rom. 5:18

God enlightened Adam concerning His will, His law. “Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat,” the Lord said. (Gen. 2:17) This was a simple law. There was nothing complex about it, or difficult to understand. Adam’s condemnation was the result of his decision to take a course contrary to the truth revealed to him. Not only did his disobedience bring death, but it also resulted in a loss of understanding. Darkness pertaining to God and to his will was an inevitable result of his “fall,” and Adam’s progeny have also received from him this heritage of “darkness.” Isaiah describes this general condition of the world, saying, “Darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people.”—Isa. 60:2

But God did not cease to love his human creation. Indeed, he “so loved the world” that he sent his beloved Son to redeem Adam and his race from death. He also made provision through Christ for the enlightenment of the world. So, after Isaiah described the “gross darkness” of the people, he added, “But the Lord shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee. And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising.”—Isa. 60:2,3

In keeping with this, Jesus announced, “I am the Light of the world”. (John 8:12) We are also informed that he is that true Light which “lighteth every man that cometh into the world.” (John 1:9) True, not “every man” has yet been enlightened by the Gospel as it shines in the face of Jesus Christ. So far as the vast majority of mankind is concerned it is still true as stated by John, “The Light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehendeth it not.”—John 1:5

Certainly those who do not comprehend the light cannot accept and rejoice in it. This is why Jesus said, “If any man hear my words, and believe not, I judge him not.” (John 12:47) To his disciples Jesus said, “Blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear.” (Matt. 13:16) When Jesus explained that he was not now judging those who heard his words and did not believe them, he gave as the reason a prophecy which he quoted and applied to himself and his work: “He hath blinded their eyes, and hardened their heart; that they should not see with their eyes, nor understand with their heart, and be converted, and I should heal them.”—John 12:40

The Apostle John said, “God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.” (John 3:17) Belief in Christ, that true Light, is the only condition upon which any can be released from this condemnation. But since, even now, the people as a whole do not comprehend the Light, the necessity for a future day of enlightenment and judgment is apparent.

The Dead to Hear

We have already quoted the Master’s words assuring us that those who now hear and believe his words receive life—by faith now, and actually in the resurrection—and that these will not come into future judgment with the world. (John 5:24) But verse 28 greatly broadens the hope. Jesus there affirms that “all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth.” Those who have believed and have proved faithful prior to death will then enter immediately into eternal life. To all others, a full opportunity to believe will be given then, and those who believe shall live.

That there is to be an opportunity after death to hear the truth, and to believe, will be a new thought to some. But it is a scriptural thought. Nowhere does the Bible say that the opportunity to receive life through Christ is limited to the present. Every Christian believes that God is merciful, and patient with sinners. But for some reason the erroneous view has been adopted that divine mercy is extended only until a person dies, and that God cannot be merciful toward an individual beyond the instant he draws his last breath.

There is no biblical support for this restricted view. From the divine standpoint the entire unbelieving world is dead in sin, and for four thousand years prior to the first advent of Jesus, God allowed the condemned world to fall asleep in death without doing anything to enlighten and save them. His sending Jesus to be the Redeemer and Savior proved that God loved his human creatures. But in order to receive life through him, they must believe; yet those millions who died before Christ came certainly did not have an opportunity to believe on him.

Countless millions have died since, who have had no opportunity to believe, because they never heard of the only name given under heaven, or among men, whereby they must be saved. (Acts 4:12) Besides, according to Jesus’ own testimony, many who hear his teachings do not comprehend the issues involved. On behalf of these, let us thank God for the assurance Jesus gives us that he has not judged them, and that they are to be judged by his “word” at a later time.

“By His Truth”

Jesus’ statement that his words would do the final judging of unbelievers is in harmony with the text which declares that in that happy time the Lord will judge the people “with his truth.” (Ps. 96:13) This is a beautiful thought. It means that all mankind are to be enlightened with the truth concerning God, and upon the basis of this enlightenment they will be given an opportunity to obey and live.

This glorious fact, so clearly taught in the Scriptures, brings into focus many texts and promises of the Bible which are otherwise contradictory. For example, John 1:9, which says Jesus is “that true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.” Certainly this was not true of those who died before Christ came! Nor has it been true of countless millions since. But this text has real meaning because of the blessed assurance that there is to be a future day of enlightenment.

In a wonderful prophecy of that day, the thousand-year period of Christ’s reign, the promise is made that “the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.”—Isaiah 11:9

Zephaniah, in a revealing prophecy now being fulfilled in the disintegration of a social order described by the Apostle Paul as “this present evil world,” tells us that following this period of distress, the Lord “will ... turn to the people a pure language [message], that they may all call upon the name of the Lord, to serve him with one consent.”—Zeph. 3:8,9

The Prophet Jeremiah tells us of a future time when the Lord will make “a new covenant with the house of Judah and with the house of Israel,” explaining that then the divine law will be written in the hearts of the people. The knowledge of the Lord will then be so universal that all shall know him, “from the least of them unto the greatest of them.”—Jer. 31:31-34

The Apostle Paul says, “God ... will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.”—I Tim. 2:3-6

At first glance the sequence given here seems contrary to other Scriptures which insist that one must have a knowledge of the truth first, then, upon the basis of this knowledge, believe and be saved; for here the apostle speaks of being “saved” first, and then receiving a knowledge of the truth.

However, in this instance Paul is not using the word saved to describe the eternal salvation which results from believing and obeying the Gospel. Rather, he is telling us that it is God’s will that all who have died in ignorance of the only name given under heaven, or among men whereby we must be saved, shall be awakened from death to have an opportunity to come to a knowledge of the truth. In other words, Paul uses the word “saved” to describe what Jesus promised when he said that all in their graves would hear his voice and come forth.

The great truth which all must learn and accept in order to obtain everlasting life is that Jesus Christ by the grace of God tasted death “for every man.” (Heb. 2:9) Paul speaks of this as a “ransom for all,” and it is this great truth that is to “be testified [made known] in due time.” The expression “due time” is very significant. It indicates that God’s loving plan for the redemption and salvation of the human race progresses in an orderly and prearranged plan in which there is a “due time” for every feature of his loving designs. The present age, and the present life, is the “due time” for some to comprehend the truth and thus to believe and obey. During the Millennium, and after the unenlightened world is awakened from death, will be the due time for them to have the Gospel “testified” in an understandable manner. Then it will be their due time to obey and live.

“And the Books Were Opened”

Revelation 20:12-15 is one of the very interesting passages of the Bible related to the future judgment day of the world. In this symbolic prophecy the future enlightenment of the people is illustrated by the idea of books being opened. This wonderful description of the judgment day reads:

“And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to his works. And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire.”

During the thousand-year reign of Christ, when the dead are being awakened, they will “stand before God” in the sense that, through the redemptive work of Christ, the original condemnation

will no longer count against them, and each will have an opportunity to believe, obey, and live. But this opportunity requires a further manifestation of divine grace. The “books” must be opened.

This is a pictorial way of telling us that he will judge the people “with his truth.” (Ps. 96:13) The “books” contain the truth, and must be opened, for as long as they remain closed, the truth is concealed and the people “comprehend it not.”

We are, of course, aware of the view held by some that the “books” referred to in this passage contain the records of the past lives of all who have died, and that these books are opened in the judgment day to discover who is worthy and who is unworthy. It should be noted, however, that the prophecy mentions the “works” of those being judged as separate from the “books,” for the judgment is said to be out of the things in the books, “according to their works.” The point is that the judgment is based upon the degree to which their works are made to conform to the truth contained in the books.

After all, the Lord would not need to look up the record of any sinner’s works to determine his worthiness or unworthiness of life; he knows, as the Scriptures state, “there is none righteous, no, not one.” (Rom. 3:10) Even the footstep followers of Jesus would be unworthy of life if they were judged by their own imperfect works.

The Lord knows that none is worthy of life through his own righteousness. But divine love provided a way of escape from condemnation through belief in Christ, in his “word,” and in the wonderful provision of his blood. But there can be no genuine belief until there is knowledge upon which faith can be based. Therefore that knowledge is provided, the “books” are opened, during the judgment day.

God is his own interpreter, and in Isaiah 29:11-18 he speaks again of these symbolic “books,” and what is implied by their opening. In this passage we are told of a “book that is sealed,” which is given to one who is learned and then to one who is unlearned. Neither is able to “read” or comprehend the meaning of its contents.

Finally the book is opened—“In that day shall the deaf hear the words of the book, and the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity, and out of darkness.” The period called “that day” is clearly shown by the context to be the time of Christ’s kingdom. And of that day the promise is made, “The meek also shall increase their joy in the Lord, and the poor among men shall rejoice in the Holy One of Israel.”—vs. 19

“According to Their Works”

In the judgment-day prophecy of Revelation 20:12-15, the dead who “stand before God” are those who are known by the Lord to have been evil. They are the ones whom Jesus described when he promised that those who “have done evil [shall come forth] unto the resurrection of judgment.” (John 5:29, RV) The works referred to, therefore, must be their works in the Kingdom, after they learn, hear, and respond to the message of the open books.

The prophecy says “another book” is also opened. It is styled the “book of life.” The dead who stand before God, and are tried upon the basis of their obedience to the things written in the books, formerly had their names listed, as it were, in a book of death, for they were all in Adam’s “book.” Paul states the thought in a slightly different manner, saying, “As in Adam all die”; but he adds, “even so in Christ shall all be made alive.”—I Cor. 15:22

So Christ’s book of life will then be opened for mankind, and as each individual of the condemned race—awakened from death and enlightened—accepts and obeys the truth, his name will be entered in that book. The opening of this book of life is not to discover whose names are

there, but to enter the names of those who, “according to their works,” prove their love for the truth by which the people will then be judged.—Ps. 96:13

The Lake of Fire

Verse 13 says that death and hell will then give up their dead. That is why the dead will have an opportunity to stand before God. Hell, or *hades*, as it is in the Greek text, is the condition of death, not a place of torment. Following the return of the dead from hell, both death and hell are to be cast into “the lake of fire,” which is described as “the second death.” It is not called the second death because everything destroyed in the lake of fire dies the second time, but because it will be the second time the death penalty will be inflicted.

In the lake of fire, which is the second death, even death itself will die. Included in that final cleansing of the earth will be the destruction of all whose names are not, finally, written in the book of life. These will be cast into the lake of fire, the second death, not to be tormented, but to be destroyed.

That glorious day when the Lord judges the people with his truth will be a time of favor for them. “When thy judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness.” (Isa. 26:9) But there will be willfully wicked ones even then who will refuse to obey the truth. Concerning this the next verse declares, “Let favor be showed to the wicked, yet will he not learn righteousness; in the land of uprightness will he deal unjustly, and will not behold the majesty of the Lord.”—Isa. 26:10

The expression “the land of uprightness” describes conditions which will exist in the earth during the reign of Christ. Peter refers to the same time, saying, “we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.” (II Pet. 3:13) Peter refers to this new era of human experience as “the day of judgment and perdition [destruction] of ungodly men.” (II Pet. 3:7) It will mean perdition for all such, for they will be “destroyed from among the people.”—Acts 3:23

But, as Peter shows, only those who refuse to hear and obey the truth when it is then presented will be revealed as ungodly and destroyed. Under the enlightening influences of the truth their willful disposition will be revealed.

The Sheep and Goats

Another lesson on the coming judgment day is Jesus’ Parable of the Sheep and Goats. (Matthew 25:31-46) The time when the parable applies is identified by the opening verse. “When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory.” Jesus sits upon the throne of his glory during the period of his reign. In the Greek text, the “angels” who appear with Christ in glory are “messengers.” The reference is to his church, those who believe during this age and, proving faithful unto death, will be glorified with him as associate kings and judges.

Before this throne of his glory all nations will be gathered, the parable states, and they will be divided as sheep and goats are divided. This is not a division between the church and the world, for the church is with her Lord in the throne. The division, rather, takes place between those of the world who had not been previously enlightened, and died as unbelievers. They are “the dead small and great” who “stand before God” when the “books” are opened. Some will then believe and obey; others will not, hence the division into two classes.

All nationalities will participate in that future judgment day scene. Jesus, on another occasion, said it would be “more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah” in the judgment day than it would be for those who rejected and persecuted him. (Matt. 10:15) This means that the people of those wicked cities of the remote past will be awakened from death and given an opportunity to repent, believe, and live.

It will be more tolerable for those wicked cities than for the Israelites who rejected Jesus, because they did not sin against so much light. But it will be tolerable for all! All are to be awakened and enlightened, and if obedient to the light, the truth, they will be judged worthy of living forever.

In the parable, the sheep class are rewarded because of their spirit of helpfulness and cooperation. To his own disciples Jesus said, “A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another, as I have loved you.” (John 13:34) When the books of truth, the words of Jesus by which the people will then be judged, are opened, it will be found that basic to all divine requirements of those found worthy of life will be an appreciation and practice of divine love, that great principle of unselfishness which leads one to be more interested in his neighbor than in himself.

This quality will be found in the sheep class. Because of this, they hear the welcome words of Jesus, “Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” (Matt. 25:34) This is the kingdom of earth, originally given to our first parents, which they lost when they disobeyed God and were driven out of Eden to die. At the close of the thousand-year judgment day, this kingdom will be restored to all who then qualify. It is this restoration that Peter describes as “restitution.”—Acts 3:19-23

The “goats” of the parable are those of Revelation 20:15 whose names are not found in the book of life. They are the wicked of Isaiah 26:10, and those of Acts 3:23, who, refusing to hear the great Teacher of that time, “shall be destroyed from among the people.”

The goat class, according to Jesus, “go away into everlasting punishment,” while the sheep receive everlasting life. (Matt. 25:46) The word “punishment” in this text is from a Greek word meaning to “cut off.” In other words, the “goats” will be “cut off” from life—destroyed. In verse 41 this is symbolized by fire—fire being one of the most destructive agencies known to man—“prepared for the Devil and his angels.”

Yes, thank God, even the Devil and the unholy angels who are with him will also be destroyed in that symbolic lake of fire which the Revelator declares to be “the second death.” Meanwhile, every child of Adam will have had a full opportunity to accept the grace of God provided through the redemptive work of Christ. None will lose life, or fail to obtain salvation, except those who, despite full enlightenment, refuse to believe and to obey the truth.

This enlarged view of the great expanse of God’s grace and love should inspire in us a greater desire than ever to serve and please him, for we have a marvelous opportunity to cooperate in the divine plan of salvation for a lost race. To receive the gift of life through Christ is a wonderful manifestation of God’s grace. But beyond this, through Christ we have the high honor of partnership with God and with his dear Son in the work of reconciling the lost world.

In view of the marvelous blessings yet in store for the human race, blessings which will come to all people during the thousand-year judgment day, it is no wonder that the psalmist called upon all creation to praise the Lord because “he cometh to judge the earth.” For “he shall judge the world with righteousness, and the people with his truth.”—Ps. 96:13

For more information on this topic of the Day of Judgment please read chapter 8 of our publication, THE DIVINE PLAN OF THE AGES.

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