

## WHAT HAPPENS WHEN CHRISTIANS SIN? - Part eight

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### WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT THE JUDGMENT SEAT OF CHRIST?

We all see time come and go. We see ourselves age. We see loved ones pass away. Our children grow up and have children of their own. We study. We prepare for careers. We work to advance and get promotions. We achieve a certain level of success. We plan for our retirement and invest funds. Then we retire and age.

So where does this all go? How shall we attach *meaning* to the passing of time? And if we *know* the destination to which all of history races - *irrevocably* races - what does this understanding do to the way we live each day, long *before* the destination of our journey here arrives?

Jesus specifically addressed the danger of the *routine* of our living numbing our minds to the *destination* of our living - Matthew 24:36-39 - "**But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. [37] As were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. [38] For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, [39] and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.**"

The Bible fastens the significance of our lives to two anchors - two bookends - over which we have no control. We are *created* beings. We didn't just happen. We had no say at all about our *entering* this world. We didn't *will* our own beginning. It just *happened* to us.

And at the opposite end of our existence we are beings *returning* to our Creator at last. This is true whether we consider it or believe it or prepare for it. We can't avoid - not in any *ultimate* sense - facing eternal judgment. So this is a topic that has relevance to everyone who draws breath. To *not* consider this seriously is the height of what the Bible would call the way of the fool.

If we don't know anything much about the judgment of God as it's poured out in the last days we should be concerned because the writer of the book of Hebrews calls this doctrine one of the "*first*," or "*elementary*" doctrines of the Christian faith. And we should all know the basics:

Hebrews 6:1-2 - "**Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, [2] and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.**"

Now, you can't help but notice the way the sacred text calls the truth of "*eternal judgment*" a *foundational* truth (6:1). He included *eternal judgment* in a list of things from which the church "*goes on to maturity.*" And that could make the careless reader think we don't need to study this anymore. But that would be a huge mistake.

When the writer says we are to *go on* from these basic truths he doesn't mean they aren't important or necessary. Rather, he means they are so basic and should be so well known that you continue to use them, almost without thinking about them, the way a writer uses the letters of the alphabet in writing a great novel. These basic truths should have such a well-known, almost automatic understanding and application to the rest of our lives.

That's my desire for you as we study this subject today. I hope, as we work through this sometimes controversial topic, that you will find blessed use of this, one of the *first* principles of the faith, to aid you in loving more passionately God's grace and mercy in Christ Jesus, fearing and reverencing God more devoutly in His justice and blazing holiness, and reaching out to the lost more eagerly and earnestly as you see the end drawing near.

#### 1) THERE WILL COME A DAY, IN REAL SPACE/TIME HISTORY, WHEN GOD, THROUGH CHRIST JESUS, WILL JUDGE ALL MANKIND, THE LIVING AND THE DEAD WHOM OUR TEXT SAYS WILL ALL BE RAISED TO PHYSICAL LIFE

Hebrews 6:1-2 - "**Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, [2] and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.**"

So we know the writer is pointing us all toward a *future* judgment. We're been studying the judgment of God in the flow our present history thus far in this series. But the writer is clearly thinking of a *future* judgment in this text. He links it up with the *resurrection of the dead*. And he does this to show that he's describing a time of judgment that will be *universal*. It will also be *unavoidable* because even physical death won't exclude anyone from involvement.

Some of you will know that theologians debate the timing of these end-time events. Those called *dispensationalists* usually divide the future judgment into at least two phases. In this scheme, Christians are judged and rewarded some time *before* a period known as the millennium, while unbelievers are judged *after* the millennium. If you were raised in Pentecostal churches, or educated in many evangelical Bible colleges, you were probably made most familiar with this agenda, and that's fine. I have no real problem with it, and nothing of eternal significance is at stake.

I have come, over these last few years, to believe that there is actually only **one**, all-encompassing time of judgment for all mankind, believers and unbelievers.

**Revelation 20:11-15** - "Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. [12] And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. [13] And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. [14] Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. [15] And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."

However many groups deal with much of the symbolic language of this apocalyptic literature, the very basic idea being flagged is that **all** the books are opened at this specific point. Then there's the noted distinction between the "**books**"(12) and the "**book of life**" (12). In some way all are judged from the content of these books. Because of John's warning tone at this point in his letter, and because he is going to cover the subject of heaven very specifically in just a few moments, he highlights the fate of the wicked more directly in Revelation 20.

There is another kind of judging mentioned earlier on in the same chapter, which takes place **before** what John calls the millennium:

**Revelation 20:1-4** - "Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. [2] And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, [3] and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while. [4] Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years."

Many people see this as their strongest text to show that there are **two** final judgments, the first for believers **before** the millennium, and the second for the wicked, **after** the millennium. But I think it is far more likely that John is seeing a different **kind** of judgment described here. **Verse 4** seems to describe some kind of recompense and heavenly recognition for a specific group who had been martyred for their faithful witness to Christ in the very last days. In some way they are affirmed by Christ's victory when it looked as though **their** battle was lost in the face of persecution. They are remembered.

I think John describes the **final** judgment of everyone **after** this heavenly scene. And I think the same idea of an inclusive time of judgment for both the righteous and the wicked can be seen in more compact description in **Revelation 11:18** - "**The nations raged, but your wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth.**"

Notice the clear references to both **wrath** being poured out and **rewards** being given. And notice that these **both** take place at the time "**for the dead to be judged.**" We aren't given a lot of details, but at least that much seems clear. You don't have to abuse the text to come to that conclusion.

But we aren't left to ponder difficult verses from Revelation. Jesus spoke a great deal about a final end-time judgment. He labored to press His teaching about this to His followers like they needed to understand it. And Jesus frequently referred to the judgment of the righteous and the unrighteous as taking place at the same time:

**Matthew 25:31-33 & 46** - "**When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. [32] Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. [33] And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left.....25:46....And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."**

If the simple words of Jesus mean anything at all, surely they indicate that this very act of separation and division implies a common **time** of judgment. The one group is **separated** from the other group. This means both groups are present and together initially.

I purposely included **verse 46** because there are those who say this passage isn't describing the final judgment at all. Verse 46 takes all reasonable doubt of that fact out of the picture. It is **eternal** punishment that is being described by our Lord, and **eternal** life - "**And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.**"

## 2) THE NATURE OF THE FINAL JUDGMENT FOR BELIEVERS

There are several important texts to consider:

a) **John 5:24** - "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not

**come into judgment, but *has passed* from death to life.**

Could there be a better verse to begin our examination of the judgment of believers? What wonderful news! The first thing we all need to remember is our final judgment will **not** be a time of condemnation. Just as surely as Jesus died and rose again, we have already (note the certainty of the present tense - "***has passed***") passed **out** of death and **into** life.

In fact, the mixing of tenses of verbs in Jesus' words could almost be confusing were it not for the emphasis He's trying to make. There's a group of people who obey and love Jesus - who have trusted in His "***words***" - who won't "***come into judgment***" (future) because they have already "***passed from death to life***" (past tense).

And we know Jesus isn't just referring to **physical** death from which His followers have passed because even those who serve and worship Jesus Christ still die physically in this world. Clearly the words of Jesus point to a victory and a confidence that reaches beyond the cemetery.

b) **2 Corinthians 5:10 - "For *we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ*, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil."**

**1 Corinthians 3:11-15 - "For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. [12] Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— [13] each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. [14] If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. [15] If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire."**

Both of these passages from Paul teach the reality of future judgment for everyone, including Christians (notice how Paul even includes himself in the "***we***" of **2 Corinthians 5:10** - "***....we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ....***"). But the **kind** of judgment won't be the same. For disciples of Jesus this is a judgment to measure our **deeds**, not condemn our **souls**. It is our **works** that are judged, not our **persons**. Paul, like the apostle James, has the confidence that genuine faith - we are all justified by **faith** and not by **works** - genuine faith will always manifest itself in service and fruit. Genuine faith always saves. It's only **hypocrisy** that will be exposed at the judgment.

Those with faith in Christ Jesus will never need to fear divine condemnation. They will be rewarded for ***faithfulness in service***, not ***condemned for past sins***.

Further, Paul says all of our works will be tested and evaluated. You only see the outward actions of my life. You don't know **why** I do what I do. But Paul pictures a time when all my deeds are **boiled down** and **reduced** to their essence. My **motives** will enter into the picture. Some of the people we thought would be first will be last, and some of the people we thought would be last will be first. Christians are all equally saved by grace, but, in ways I cannot fully explain, we will not all receive equal reward in the final kingdom.

We don't all get dealt the same kind of hand in the circumstances of life. There are people listening to me preach today who have never had the joy of living under the same roof with a spouse who prays for you and shares your spiritual aspirations and goals. There are women listening to me preach who have to live their days with **non-promise keepers**. Yet they stay with them. They are faithful and devoted spouses. They love Jesus and serve Him in the church. They carry burdens I don't have to carry in this life. And my heart goes out to them.

But more than just my empathy, I want to say to each of them today, "***Great is your reward in heaven!***" It will be so much greater than mine. Remember, God doesn't miss anything.

Remember the words of Jesus from the beginning of this teaching. Remember how He cautioned against the **routine** of daily living distracting people from the **destination** of living. Let me close with more hopeful words. The aged apostle John reminds Christians to constantly live life with eyes on the horizon:

**1 John 3:1-3 - "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. [2] Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. [3] And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure."**

Don't miss John's' simple point. **Hope** for the journey can only be had looking constantly toward the **goal** of the journey. People who live life with a **Christ returning hope** have an easier time saying no to sin and addiction and discouragement.

You can't purify your life just by looking at bad things and saying "***No! No! Bad! Bad!***" There's no power in that. No. Fix your eyes on the eternal hope and delight of Christ and His eternal reward. Let the things of this earth become ridiculous and empty in the light of His glory and grace. That's where the hope is and that's where the power is and that's where the joy is!

Let this encourage your heart today. Only looking to Jesus for your glory and reward will hold you up through life. There simply isn't enough to anchor our hope to in this world. God never intended to sustain you with mere earthly hope. There is a great

day of reversal coming. Always look to Jesus. He will bring to completion the full weight of His love for you when He comes again.