

# A Study of the Final Judgment

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## Introduction

In 2 Corinthians 4:9, Paul begins a lengthy discussion of persecution and even death that may result from faithful service to Christ. Paul argued that even if one must suffer affliction unto death it would but produce eternal glory (4:16–18). He went on to discuss his personal preference to go on to his eternal reward, all the while realizing that it was not his choice to make (5:1–8). However, he stated his aim to live in such a way as to please God, whether he remained here on earth or was called away by death (5:9). In verse 10, he then voiced his great concern about pleasing God in light of the Judgment to come: “For we must all be made manifest before the judgment-seat of Christ; that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he hath done, whether it be good or bad.”

It is not possible to correctly conceive of man's relationship to God while ignoring or denying the reality of man's accountability to God. The fact that the Scriptures exist as the revelation of God's will for man and that they insist that man must be obedient to the Divine will necessarily implies a time of accounting based upon that Divine will. However, the Scriptures are also explicit in their frequent statements concerning the Final Judgment. Beginning with the text before us, let us study what the Bible teaches about the Final Judgment.

## The Final Judgment Is Certain

Paul wrote of the Judgment in terms of certainty. That it would occur was beyond doubt or question. Since it is an occasion at which all must appear, it follows that the Judgment itself is an occasion that must occur. None can escape it (Rom. 2:3), thus its certainty is certified. God has “appointed a day when he will judge the world...” (Acts 17:31) and the appointments of God cannot be set aside. Paul preached “the judgment to come” to Governor Felix (Acts 24:25). That the Judgment will occur is just as sure as the existence of God Himself: “For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God” (Rom. 14:11). Indeed, “The Lord shall judge His people” (Heb. 10:30b). Those who think that somehow God's planned Judgment of mankind will be thwarted, overturned, or changed are vain and idle thinkers!

## The Final Judgment Will Be Universal

“The judgment seat of Christ” is that before which we must all appear. **Everyone** will be present to receive sentence according to the way he has lived. The Lord Himself taught that at the Judgment **all nations** would be gathered (Mat. 25:31–32). Paul mockingly asked the Jewish

saints in Rome if they thought they would escape the Judgment of God (Rom. 2:3). He also wrote a strong statement on the universality of the Judgment in Romans 14:10b-12: "For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.... So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God." The "great and the small" will be present at the Judgment (Rev. 20:12), which includes all who now live and have ever lived. Just as death is appointed for all men, so is the Judgment (Heb. 9:27).

Men who violate the law are not always brought to justice on earth. Some get out on bail before they are tried, jump bond, and are never brought to trial. Some escape by their privileged position or by bribery of public officials. Some are released on legal technicalities. Some are simply never apprehended.

It is foolish for any person to entertain the idea for even a moment that he may somehow escape God's Final Judgment. The Jews apparently thought their privileged position as God's people would allow them to escape the Judgment (Rom. 2:3). Paul hastened to destroy that illusion by telling them that God "...will render to every man according to his deeds" (Rom. 2: 6). Neither power, reputation, riches, nor hiding will enable anyone to avoid the universal Judgment, as vividly taught in Revelation 6:15-17:

And the kings of the earth, and the princes, and the chief captains, and the rich, and the strong, and every bondman and freeman, hid themselves in the caves and in the rocks of the mountains; and they say to the mountains and to the rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: for the great day of their wrath is come; and who is able to stand?

The final Judgment is universal!

### **Christ Will Be the Judge**

God, the Father, is depicted as the Judge of men in many passages. Solomon declared: "God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil" (Ecc. 12:14). At Athens Paul preached that God "...hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness..." (Acts 17:31). As earlier noted, Paul wrote, "So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God" (Rom. 14:12). Peter taught that "...the Father...without respect of persons judgeth according to every man's work..." (1 Pet. 1:17). In one of his visions, John "...saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne; and books were opened: and another book was opened, which is *the book of life*: and the dead were judged out of the things which were written in the books, according to their works." (Rev. 20:12).

The Bible also teaches just as explicitly that Christ will be the Judge. In 2 Corinthians 5:10 Paul stated the “judgment seat of Christ” is that before which we must all appear. He further wrote that Jesus Christ will one day judge the secrets of men (Rom. 2:16). The Lord said: “For neither doth the Father judge any man, but he hath given all judgment unto the Son” (John 5:22). Christ identified Himself to the church at Thyatira as “he which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto each one of you according to your works” (Rev. 2:23).

Let none think for a moment, however, that there is a contradiction regarding who the Judge will be. Often one who authorizes an act and/or commissions another to execute it is said to execute it himself. This principle of agency is illustrated in the baptism Jesus preached and practiced while He labored on earth: “The Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John, (Though **Jesus himself baptized not**, but his disciples)” (John 4:1-2, *emph. DM*). By this same principle, **God the Father** is said to be the Judge in the Final Judgment. The one Whom He has authorized and commissioned to execute judgment on His behalf is His Son: “...And he [the Father] gave him [the Son] authority to execute judgment, because he is a son of man” (John 5:27). To Cornelius, Peter explained that Christ “...is ordained of God to be the Judge of the living and the dead” (Acts 10:42). At Athens, Paul not only preached that God would judge the world (as already noticed), but that He would do so “...by that man [Christ] whom he hath ordained...” (Acts 17:31). Thus, we see that God will judge the world **through** His Son, His Agent, Who will be the **actual** Judge.

We will not be judged by a mere imperfect man or by a group of our finite peers, which sometime punish the innocent and free the guilty. Could there be a more sobering thought than that we are living as accountable creatures before the God of Heaven and that we must stand before His Son in Judgment? Nothing can be hidden from the Judge of all:

And there is no creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and laid open before the eyes of him with whom we have to do. (Heb. 4:13).

The perfect Judge will render perfect judgment.

### **The Final Judgment Will Be Individual**

As already noted, Paul taught the Corinthians (and us through them) that Christ will judge each one of us. God will “render to every man according to his works (Rom. 2:6). “So then each one of us shall give account of himself to God” (Rom. 14:12). “The soul that sinneth, it shall die: the son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of

the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him" (Eze. 18:20).

All of this means that **I** will not be judged according to **your** life and **you** will not be judged by **mine**. We will not be judged according to family units. While the Lord is most certainly concerned about every congregation of His people (as Romans–Revelation proves), He will not finally judge men by congregations, but **individually**. The unbelieving husband will not be able to successfully plead for mercy at the Judgment on the basis that he was married to a wonderful Christian wife. It will do no good for the rebellious son or daughter to mention godly parents. The reprobate, backslidden Christian will cry in vain, "But Lord, I was a member of a congregation that was loyal, zealous, and faithful to you." (Of course, one who is faithful to Christ will be a member of a faithful congregation. He does not want even one of His followers to lend his influence and give his money to help a congregation that is marching steadily toward denominationalism, or worse, that has attained that status. However, merely having one's name on the roll of a faithful congregation, while living a life contrary to the Word, will not help one at the Judgment.)

The nineteenth century American statesman, Daniel Webster, was once asked what he considered to be his most important thought. His response likely surprised his querist: "The most important thought I ever had was that of my individual responsibility to God." Remember that before the Judgment seat of Christ **each one** of us will "receive the things done in the body, according to what **he** hath done, whether it be good or bad." (2 Cor. 5:10b, *emph. DM*).

### **The Factors of the Final Judgment**

Upon what factors will the Lord render our judgment? Paul gave us the answer in 2 Corinthians 5:10: "...the things done in the body, **according to what he hath done**, whether it be good or bad." Again, God "...will render to every man **according to his works**" (Rom. 2:6, *emph. DM*). The Lord Himself taught the same Truth: "For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall render unto every man **according to his deeds**" (Mat. 16:27; see also Jam. 2:12; Jude 14–15; Rev. 2:23; 22:12; *emph. DM*). By these statements we understand that the Lord will bring forth the record of how each person has lived upon this earth. This record will be evaluated in light of the commands and instructions for living that God gave in His Word.

In describing the great Judgment scene, he was permitted to see in a heavenly vision, John mentioned the opening of books, one of which was called "the book of life." He continued,

“...And the dead were judged out of the things which were written in the books, **according to their works**” (Rev. 20:12, emph. DM). The simplest and most obvious explanation of these books is that the books John mentioned initially refer to the Divine standard of God's Word and that the “book of life” refers to the Divine record of the way each one has lived.

Our behavior while living in this physical realm involves the following:

1. The things God commands us to do that we neglected or **failed to do**. The three Judgment parables in Matthew 25 have a common thread. The five foolish virgins, the one talent man, and the “goats” on the Lord's left hand were all lost for the same reason – neglect, failure to do their duty! James warned, “Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and **doeth it not**, to him it is sin” (Jam. 4:17, emph. DM). Paul exhorted Timothy, “Neglect not the gift that is in thee...” (1 Tim. 4:14). There is no escape from the Final Judgment of God against those who neglect the great salvation (Heb. 2:3).
2. The **words we speak**. Jesus said, “...Every idle **word** that men shall **speak**, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy **words** thou shalt be justified, and by thy **words** thou shalt be condemned (Mat. 12:36–37, emph. DM). James wrote, “So **speak** ye..., as men that are to be judged by a law of liberty” (Jam. 2:12, emph DM). Jude said that the Lord would execute judgment upon all, including the ungodly sinners for all the hard things which they have spoken against Him (Jude 15). We had better pay attention to the teaching of Scripture on pure and truthful speech!
3. The **things that are secret**. The Final Judgment is that day “...when God shall judge the secrets of men...by Jesus Christ...” (Rom. 2:16). Hebrews 4:13 declares: “And there is no creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and laid open before the eyes of him with whom we have to do.” As previously noted, to the church at Thyatira the Lord warned, “...I am he that searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto each one of you according to your works” (Rev. 2:23). Solomon closed Ecclesiastes with the following alert: “For God will bring every work into judgment, with every hidden thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil” (Ecc. 12:14). We may hide many things from men, thinking they will never be known. Such is shown to be folly, however. We have no secrets before God! We must live so as to not be ashamed for every part of our thought and conduct to be exposed. Some day they shall be.

### **The Standard of the Final Judgment**

The standard of Judgment is closely related to the factors of our Judgment, but it deserves separate attention. Paul does not tell what the standard is in 2 Corinthians 5:10, but elsewhere the Bible does. The standard is the Word of God itself. As noticed earlier, it is most likely that “the books” that John saw opened at the Judgment were the Scriptures (Rev. 20:12). The Psalmist wrote: “...For he [Jehovah] cometh to judge the earth: he will judge the world with righteousness, And the peoples with his truth” (Psa. 96:13; cf. 98:9). Our Lord warned, “He that

rejecteth me, and receiveth not my sayings, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I spake, the same shall judge him in the last day" (John 12:48). In his lengthiest discussion of the Judgment, Paul wrote that "the judgment of God is according to truth..." [i.e., the Word of God, John 17:17] and that men would be judged according to the Gospel the apostle preached (Rom 2:2, 16). James described God's Word as "the perfect law of liberty" and then declared that we will be judged by it (Jam. 1:21-25; 2:12).

Some assume without warrant that to teach that God's Word is the standard of Final Judgment is to teach that all men will be judged by all of the Bible. This is not so. Paul stated an important principle in Romans 3:19: "Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it speaketh to them that are under the law; that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may be brought under the judgment of God." *The law* referred to in this passage is the Law of Moses. It was given to the Jews; they alone were under it, and only those who lived while it was in force will be judged by it. This principle applies likewise to those (commonly called the "Patriarchs") who lived before the Law of Moses was given and to their Gentile descendants who lived after God gave that law to the Israelites. God had given various commands and prohibitions from the beginning, which were handed down from generation to generation. Although we do not have a written record of all of those laws which God communicated to them orally (e.g., concerning worship and murder [Gen. 4:3-12]), they are no less the Word of God. Had God not given them any law it would have been impossible for them to sin, because "...where there is no law, neither is there transgression" (Rom. 4:15; cf. 5:13). This principle also applies to those who have lived since the abolition of the Law of Moses (Col. 2:14) and the beginning of the Gospel of Christ.

From the application of the principle stated in Romans 3:19, it follows that all men will be judged by the spiritual law system under which they lived. Those from Adam to the enactment of the Law of Moses, and those Gentiles who lived during the time that the law was in force, will not be judged by the Law of Moses – they were never under it. God will judge them by those laws God gave to them as Patriarchs and Gentiles, respectively (i.e., "Patriarchal Law"). The Jews who lived while the Law of Moses was in force will not be judged either by Patriarchal Law or by the Gospel. They were never under either. The Jews who lived before the Gospel went into effect and before the Law of Moses was abolished (which happened simultaneously with the death of Christ, Eph. 2:14-16; Col. 2:14; Heb. 9:15-17) were under the Law of Moses and will be judged by it alone.

What about those now living and all who have lived since the Cross? It was about this group that Jesus said, "The word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day" (John 12:48b). It was of us who live in this last age, the Christian Age, that Paul and James wrote, respectively, that we would be judged according to the Gospel, "the law of liberty." Unlike either Patriarchal Law or the Law of Moses, which were limited concerning those to whom they were addressed, the Gospel, the Law of Christ, is addressed to all men (Mat. 28:19; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47). It is a grievous error to teach that only **those who obey** the Law of Christ are accountable to it and will be judged by it. Those who so teach must both limit the scope of the Gospel and invent a separate law system for those who are not children of God. Thus, brother E.C. Fuqua (1950's) had alien sinners under his "civil" and/or "ecclesiastical" law, brother James D. Bales put them under his "law in the heart," and brother Dan Billingsly (whom I debated on this subject in 1986) placed them under his "great moral law."

The New Testament places all men who have lived since the Gospel went into effect under that very Gospel, the Law/Covenant/Testament of Christ. This is why it must be preached to all the world—all men are accountable to it. To teach that some men are not accountable to it renders the great commission consummate foolishness! The very reason the law of Christ must be preached to the whole creation is because the whole creation (since its enactment) is accountable to it and will be judged by it! Let none forget that the Word of God will be the standard of the Final Judgment.

Ought we not to be thankful that **God's Word** is the standard of judgment, rather than the imperfect and often perverted **laws of men**?

### **The Final Judgment Will Be Impartial**

After stating that good and evil among both Jew and Gentile would receive their appropriate rewards at the Judgment, Paul wrote, "For there is no respect of persons with God" (Rom. 2:11). Peter wrote that God "without respect of persons judgeth according to each man's work..." (1 Pet. 1:17). Paul told the Athenians Christ would "judge the world in righteousness" (Acts 17:31), that is, in perfect fairness, in such a way that complete justice would be done. This can only be accomplished if the Judgment is entirely impartial.

The judgments of men, even by the best of us, are subject to partiality and prejudice. It is almost a universal trait in men to judge one another by outward appearances (race, language, age, education, economic level, bodily features, etc.). God does not judge men by such surface elements: "For the Jehovah seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance,

but Jehovah looketh on the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7b). Peter set forth the same emphatic principle to Cornelius: "Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34b-35). Christ challenged us to imitate Him in the judgments of one another we must render: "Judge not according to appearance, but judge righteous judgment" (John 7:24). What all of this amounts to is that the Final Judgment will be rendered by an objective standard and Judge, as opposed to subjective ones. Multiplied billions of people will be disappointed upon receiving a sentence of eternal doom at the Judgment, but none shall be able to complain that they were not justly or impartially judged.

### **The Time of the Final Judgment**

Just when will the Judgment occur in the course of final events? First, it will be after the Lord comes again. To introduce His description of the Judgment, Jesus said: "But **when** the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the angels with him, **then** shall he sit on the throne of his glory" (Mat. 25:31, emph. DM). The throne Jesus said He would occupy at His coming is not the resurrected throne of David for a literal millennial reign in Jerusalem (as alleged by the premillennial heresy), but His Judgment throne. John described it as "a great white throne" before which the great and the small stood to be judged (Rev. 20:11-12). Paul also affirmed that the Judgment will take place after Christ. He mentioned the "righteous judgment of God" and then said it will occur "at the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven with the angels of his power in flaming fire, rendering vengeance to them that know not God, and to them that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus" (2 The. 1:5, 7-8). There can be no doubt that the Judgment will occur after Christ returns.

The Judgment will also be after the resurrection of the dead. Jesus said...

Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice and shall come forth; they that have done good unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation" (John 5:28-29).

Revelation 20:13 indicates the same: "And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell [Hades, ASV] delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works."

Furthermore, the Judgment will occur after the material universe has been destroyed. To introduce his description of the Judgment, John wrote: "And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no



place for them” (Rev. 20:11). Notice that this precedes the Judgment, which John immediately describes (vv. 12–15). Peter provided a fuller description of the end of all material things:

But the heavens that now are, and the earth, by the same word have been stored up for fire, being reserved against the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.... But the day of the Lord [i.e., of His coming] will come as a thief; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall be dissolved with fervent heat, and the earth and the works that are therein shall be burned up. (2 Pet. 3:7, 10).

Notice that the heavens and earth are reserved unto fire “against the day of judgment.” I understand the meaning of Peter's phrase to be, “until the time for the Day of Judgment.” That is, when the time for the Final Judgment comes (but just before it occurs), the material universe will be destroyed by fire. By this means the earth and the heaven will flee away and there will be found no place for them (Rev. 20:11b).

### **The Final Judgment Will Cause Separation**

In the Lord's comprehensive description of the Judgment, he said of Himself, the Son of man:

And before him shall be gathered all the nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as the shepherd separateth the sheep from the goats; and he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left” (Mat. 25:32–33).

In John's description of the Judgment, he wrote: “And if any was not found written in the book of life, he was cast into the lake of fire” (Rev. 20:15). In saying that some were not in the book of life, this passage implies that some were in it, thus creating a separation in their destinies based upon their earthly records (as earlier discussed).

There will be only two groups into which all mankind will be separated at the Judgment: Those who have served God and those who have served mammon (Mat. 6:24); those who have travelled the straitened way and those who have travelled the broad way (Mat. 7:13–14); those who were wise and those who were foolish (Mat. 7:23–27; 25:1–13); those who were good and those who were evil (John 5:29). There will be no middle ground at the Judgment for those too evil to be saved, but too good to go to be lost. There will be only the saved (Acts 2:47) and the lost (2 Cor. 4:3).

Godly Christian wives who yearned for their lost husbands to obey the Gospel will be separated from them. Faithful parents who reared their children in the Truth, but saw them apostatize in adult life, will be separated from them. Brothers and sisters in the flesh, some of whom served Christ loyally, and others of which denied the Lord that bought them, will be

separated at the Judgment. Dear friends who were closer than kin will be separated because one was a dedicated Christian and the other was not. The Judgment Day will be the time of this great separation.

### **The Final Judgment Will Be Final**

Although it is redundant to say, “The final judgment will be final,” I do so for emphasis. It will be God's last word concerning Satan and sin. It will be final in the sense that all injustices on earth will be satisfied and avenged (Rom. 12:19). It will be final in that there will be no higher court or judge to which one can appeal. No sentence from the Judge of all men will be overturned or even called in question. It will also be final in the sense that it will be the last event before men enter into their eternal destinies. Earthly life is a probationary period where we are given multiplied choices in which we may obey or reject Christ. There will be no additional period of probation following the Judgment; there will be no further opportunities to believe and obey God's Word. Purgatory and all other suggestions of a realm of “second chance after death and/or the Lord’s return are all figments of human imagination and wishful thinking.

The great separation previously discussed will be final, eternal: “And these [the “goats” on the Lord’s left hand] shall go away into eternal punishment: but the righteous into eternal life” (Mat. 25:46). At the Judgment God will render incorruption and eternal life to the righteous, but wrath and indignation to the unrighteous (Rom. 2:6–9). Just as the Lord's people will be taken to Heaven to be with Him forever (1 The. 4:17), the disobedient will be punished forever in Hell, the lake of fire, a place apart from the Lord's presence (Mat. 10:28; Rev. 20:10,15; 2 The. 1:7–9). With the coming of the Lord in Judgment, there will be no more atheists, infidels, agnostics, doubters, or skeptics: “For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, to me every knee shall bow, And every tongue shall confess to God” (Rom. 14:11). However, the sudden “conversion” of the unbelieving and disobedient masses will be too little and too late. When the Lord comes the door of mercy and the window of grace will be closed, never to be opened again, by the Lord Himself, “...he that openeth and none shall shut, and that shutteth and none openeth” (Rev. 3:7b). There is nothing more final than the Final Judgment!

### **Conclusion**

What are the appropriate responses to these sobering truths about the Final Judgment? Those who know not God and who have not obeyed the Gospel ought to ponder long and well the description of their fate and obey Christ while they have opportunity. The Lord will come

“In flaming fire, rendering vengeance to them that know not God, and to them that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus: who shall suffer punishment, even eternal destruction from the face of the Lord and from the glory of his might” (2 The. 1:7-9). This involves confessing their faith in Christ (Rom. 10:10), repenting of their sins, being baptized for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38), and living a life of steadfast service to Christ (1 Cor. 15:58).

Those who have become children of God ought to soberly contemplate the Judgment as well. In view of the coming of the Lord and the destruction of the material universe, which will usher in the Judgment, Peter wrote:

Seeing that these things are thus all to be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in *all* holy living and godliness, looking for and earnestly desiring the coming of the day of God.... Wherefore, beloved, seeing that ye look for these things, give diligence that ye may be found in peace, without spot and blameless in his sight (2 Pet. 3:11-12, 14).

Let us remember that the great Judgment passage of 2 Corinthians 5:10 (with which we began this study) was addressed to saints. Immediately following this description of the Judgment, Paul indicated appropriate behavior on our part: “Knowing therefore the fear of the Lord, we persuade men...” (2 Cor. 5:11a). In light of the approaching Final Judgment of all men, God's people must do all we can to preach the Gospel so that all may have an opportunity to hear and be persuaded by it, thereby preparing for that Great Day.

[**Note:** I wrote this MS for and I presented a digest of it orally at the 8th Annual Denton Lectures, hosted by the Pearl St. Church of Christ, Denton, TX, Nov. 12-16, 1989. It was published in the book of the lectures, *Studies in 2 Corinthians*, ed. Dub McClish (Valid Pub., Inc., Denton, TX)].

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