

Judgment Must Begin



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Eccles. 12:14; Dan. 12:1, 2; Matt. 8:12; 22:1-13; 25:31-33, 46; John 3:18; 2 Cor. 5:10.*

Memory Text: “In the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ according to my gospel” (*Romans 2:16*).

Graffiti written on a wall by an Italian atheist reads: “There is no God—and Mary is His mother!” However funny, the point is important: As human beings, we are subjective creatures. However much we might try to be objective—to look at things honestly, fairly, logically, without preconceived notions—we inevitably bring our own ideas, culture, moods, and experiences into whatever subject we approach. Even the idea of not having a preconceived notion about something is, indeed, to have a preconceived notion about something.

This week, while realizing our inherent limitations, we’re going to be as objective as we can as we look at what the Bible says about judgment. Let’s forget for the moment about 1844, the pre-Advent judgment, Ellen White, Hiram Edson in the cornfield, etc. Instead, let’s just let the Bible speak for itself on this important topic. And, as it does, let’s see what answers it gives to the following questions: How are judgment and the gospel linked? What are the final results of judgment? Are Christians judged? What role do works play in judgment? When is the judgment?

Though none of these answers contains all that we need to know on the subject, woven together they form a nice tapestry that will enable us to grasp better the concept of judgment, regardless of whatever preconceptions we already have about it.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 8.*

Hour of His Judgment

As Adventist Christians, we say that the gospel of Jesus Christ is “good news.” In fact, the Greek word translated “gospel” means just that, “good news.”

But if it’s good news, it’s good news about what? It’s the good news that Jesus died as our Substitute (*1 Pet. 2:24*); that at the Cross He paid the penalty for our sins (*Isa. 53:6*); that through faith in Him we stand perfect in God now because we are covered with perfect righteousness (*Rom. 3:22*); and that because of what He has done for us, we have the promise of eternal life (*1 John 5:11, 12*).

So, the good news is that we have eternal life, as opposed to—what?

Read the following texts. **What’s the option for those who, in the end, don’t have eternal life?** *Dan. 12:2, Matt. 8:12, 25:46, John 3:18, 2 Thess. 1:9, Rev. 14:11.*

Look at some of the images and phrases from these texts: “everlasting punishment,” “smoke of their torment,” “condemned,” “everlasting destruction,” “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” If this isn’t talking about judgment, what is?

Thus, the good news of the gospel is that we *are spared* condemnation in judgment. In other words, inherent in the gospel itself is the promise that those who have accepted Jesus aren’t condemned as are those who have rejected Him. There is, then, no such thing as the gospel without judgment because “the good news” of the gospel is that we are spared condemnation. In short, the gospel without judgment is like a circle without roundness: By its very definition, the gospel includes judgment.

Read Romans 2:16 and Revelation 14:6-8. How do these verses show the link between the gospel and judgment? How does what we’ve read today help you to understand even better what we have to thank the Lord for because of the sacrifice of Jesus?

Life or Damnation?

Look up the texts below. Who are the two ultimate classes of people depicted here?

Dan. 12:2

Matt. 12:37

John 3:16

John 5:29

Whatever else judgment involves, it results in only two classes of people: those who are saved eternally and those who are lost eternally. These texts don't show any kind of happy medium or middle ground. In the end, the ultimate fate of all of us is either eternal life or eternal destruction.

Thus, it's clear from even these texts that some sort of judgment divides the righteous from the wicked. A final separation occurs, a judgment in which the final fate of everyone is, forever, decided.

Read the following text: “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: and before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: and he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left” (*Matt. 25:31-33*). What more do they teach us about the nature of judgment?

A number of fascinating points are brought out here. First of all, who is being judged? It says that “all nations” shall be gathered before Him. Thus, this seems to be some sort of universal judgment; all nations come under scrutiny, which means that everyone does because, after all, is not the Lord “the Judge of all the earth” (*Gen. 18:25*)?

Here, too, we are faced with the same clear division: the sheep and the goats, the lost and the saved, those who shall, in Christ's own words, “go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal” (*Matt. 25:46*).

It doesn't get much plainer than that.

Dwell on the sober implications of the texts for today's study. How much more earnest should you be in caring not only for your own soul but in working prayerfully and faithfully for the salvation of others?

House of God

Yesterday's study revealed the idea of some sort of universal, end-time judgment that involved all people. But what about the church? What about those who have professed the name of Jesus and, from all outward appearances, are living the Christian life in sincerity and faithfulness? Are they, too, judged?

As Christians, we understand that Jesus was judged and condemned at the Cross in our stead. He faced the condemnation for sin that we, otherwise, would have to face ourselves (*see Isa. 53:4-6, Matt. 20:28, Rom. 5:8, 2 Cor. 5:14, Eph. 5:2, 1 Thess. 5:10*). As Ellen White expressed it: "Upon Christ as our substitute and surety was laid the iniquity of us all. He was counted a transgressor, that He might redeem us from the condemnation of the law. The guilt of every descendant of Adam was pressing upon His heart."—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 753. Does this mean, then, that because Christ was condemned in our stead, Christians don't face judgment?

Look up the following texts. How do they answer the question Are Christians judged?

Matt. 7:21-23

Rom. 14:10

Heb. 10:30

1 Pet. 4:17

These few texts, along with many others, make it abundantly clear that God's people, His church, do face judgment. When Jesus in Matthew chided those who claimed that they did many wonderful things "in thy name," He wasn't talking to atheists, Hindus, or Wiccans because they don't do things in His name. Christians do. Paul's words that "we shall all" stand before the judgment seat includes himself in those who will be judged.

There's no question that, according to the Word of God, those who profess to be followers of Christ, those who are indeed "his people" (*Heb. 10:30*) will face some sort of judgment at the end of time.

When was the last time you were judged, either rightfully or wrongfully? What difference does it make for you knowing that, in the end, God will judge both with mercy and with justice? Why do you want mercy more than justice? Why will you need it?

“Every Secret Thing”

“For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil” (*Eccles. 12:14*).

Solomon writes the whole book of Ecclesiastes and ends with the above text, which is about as clear and unambiguous a statement one could find in Scripture regarding not only the reality of judgment but that judgment involves our works, even “every secret thing.”

Of course, Solomon wasn’t the only one to tell us about a judgment by works. Jesus was pretty explicit in Matthew 12:36, 37 when He said that “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.” Peter makes it plain also: “And if ye call on the Father, who without respect of persons judgeth according to every man’s work, pass the time of your sojourning here in fear” (*1 Pet. 1:17*). Paul, too, understands the reality of a judgment by works: “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad” (*2 Cor. 5:10*). John, in Revelation, writes also of a judgment by works: “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” (*Rev. 20:12*).

What other Bible texts can you find, such as in the parables, that talk very clearly about a judgment by works?

Why does it make sense for there to be a judgment by works? When you think about all the evil that has been done in this world, how could God be just if there weren’t such a judgment? On the lines below write out why it’s important, especially in the context of theodicy (see last week’s lesson), for there to be a judgment by works. Be prepared to compare your answers in class on Sabbath.

His Reward Is With Him

Read Matthew 22:1-13 and then answer the following questions:

1 What is the wedding imagery all about? See also *Isa. 62:5, Hos. 2:19, Matt. 9:15, Rev. 21:2.*

2 What significance is there to the fact that a person who had accepted the invitation faced judgment?

3 What was the fate of the man who, after scrutiny, was found without a garment?

What this parable also teaches is that there is some sort of judgment prior to execution of the sentence. After all, even in human courts, how often is a sentence executed before an inquiry that leads to judgment? Revelation 22:12, in which the Lord says that when He returns, His “reward is with me,” also implies a prior judgment. (Why would the reward already be with Him if there were not something beforehand that determined who should get it?) Second Corinthians 5:10 implies a reckoning prior to a final reward or punishment, so that “each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body” (*NIV*). This idea is found also in Daniel 12:1, where those found in the book of life are delivered.

Any kind of judgment according to works implies a reckoning of those works *before* the execution of the reward or punishment that those works have deserved, be that judgment a hundred years or a hundred seconds before the punishment or vindication is carried out. And because, according to many of the texts we’ve seen this week, the reward or punishment comes at the Second Coming, there must be some sort of reckoning or judgment prior to that event itself.

How would you like to be judged, even punished, prior to some sort of fair scrutiny of the facts? Why, then, is the idea of a prior judgment so fair and logical? Think, too, about the question of theodicy, of God being vindicated in His whole dealing with Satan, sin, and evil. How does the idea of theodicy help us understand the need for a scrutiny prior to execution of a sentence?

Further Study: “Judgment deserves careful attention, since it is involved in the issues of (a) divine justice in an unjust world (theodicy), (b) retribution for wrong done, (c) the suffering of the innocent, (d) the resolution of the conflict of good and evil, and (e) the end of sin and suffering. But above all, final judgment vindicates the Creator—His character, law, and governance—in the minds of all created intelligences, whether loyal or lost, thereby obtaining eternal security and peace for the universe. Judgment is thus portrayed in Scripture as an essential part of the ‘eternal gospel’ (Rev. 14:6, 7).”—*Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, vol. 12, p. 815.

This week we’ve seen that Scripture teaches the following points about judgment: (1) Judgment and the gospel are linked, even inseparable; (2) there is some sort of final judgment near the end of time; (3) among those judged are the professed followers of Christ; (4) works are clearly part of this judgment; (5) only two final outcomes are presented, eternal life or eternal destruction; and (6) some sort of judgment takes place prior to the execution of the sentence.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ As a class, go over your answers to the question at the end of Wednesday’s study. What can you learn from one another? How, too, does the question of theodicy play in with your answers?
- ❷ Go around the class and have each person who is willing answer this question: How do you feel about the prospect of being judged by your works?
- ❸ Ask different people in the class whether they have ever been in a position in which they had to execute some sort of judgment upon another person. What was the process like? How important was it to be fair? How seriously did they take their responsibility? Why was it important to get all the facts before coming to a conclusion? What can the class learn from what was said that could help us better understand the idea of God’s judgment?

Seeking the Faith of Jesus

Nixon Noel

When I realized that the church I had grown up in did not follow all of God's teachings, I began searching for a church that kept all of God's commandments, a church whose members loved one another. I asked my friends for suggestions, and I prayed for God's guidance. I was sure that somewhere I would find a church that stood faithful to God's Word.

One Sunday I heard a radio program amplified by a loud speaker outside my home. The speaker's message captured my attention. After the program ended, the radio announcer identified the station as the Voice of Hope, broadcasting from Haitian Adventist University in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. The announcer invited listeners to a week-long series of meetings starting the next day.

I went to the meetings and arrived early so I would not miss a thing. The speaker's messages filled my spirit and refreshed my soul. I returned every night and drank up the wonderful truths I was hearing. On Friday evening, the last night of the meetings, I wondered where I could go to continue feasting on the truths I had heard all week.

As I walked out of the hall, a woman invited me to church the next day. Eagerly I accepted her invitation. I hurried home to polish my only pair of shoes and press my threadbare shirt and trousers. My parents urged me to wait to go until I had better clothes. But I was determined. If the people in this church treated me badly because of my clothes, then I would know it was not God's church.

As I entered the church, I was welcomed warmly and shown to a seat. The sermon touched my heart. During the closing song the pastor invited those present to give their hearts to God. As the pastor repeated his invitation, I walked forward.

The people prayed for me, and I knew I had found the church I was searching for, the church that shows God's love to everyone regardless of status or clothes, the church that teaches the truth without fear of others. I accepted each Bible truth as it was revealed to me, and I joined the Adventist Church.

I thank God for the Voice of Hope in Haiti, the voice that led me to Jesus.

The Voice of Hope radio station recently received part of a Thirteenth Sabbath Offering, which will allow the station to increase its output and reach even more people in Haiti for Christ.

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