

The Judging Process



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 25:31–46; Dan. 7:9–14; 1 Cor. 6:2, 3; 2 Pet. 2:4–6; Mal. 4:1; Rev. 21:8.*

Memory Text: “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad” (2 Corinthians 5:10, NIV).

If Scripture is clear about one thing, it is the reality of judgment. God will judge the world. The texts, both in the Old Testament and the New, are numerous and without ambiguity. The justice so lacking here and now will one day come.

The Bible says that God has “‘perfect knowledge’ ” (*Job 37:16, NIV*) and “knows everything” (*1 John 3:20, NIV*), including our most secret intentions (*Eccles. 12:14, Jer. 17:10*). We can hide from everyone and everything else, but nothing is hidden from God.

What this reality implies is that He does not need a judgment for Himself to know the life of each individual. God's judgments are, indeed, a divine accommodation, carried on for the sake of His creatures, both in heaven and on earth. This process is of a cosmic-historical nature because Lucifer began his rebellion in heaven and then spread it to this world (*Rev. 12:7–9*).

During this week we will consider the end-time judgment process with its three main phases: the pre-Advent judgment, the millennial judgment, and the executive judgment. The whole process ends with the vindication of the righteous and the second death of the wicked.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 24.

The Final Judgment

For many, the idea of judgment means condemnation. And though that's part of the process, we mustn't forget that the idea of judgment has a positive side, in that judgment also involves the vindication of the righteous. Actually, the book of Daniel refers to an end-time judgment "in favor of the saints of the Most High" (*Dan. 7:22, NKJV*). God's judgment includes both—a principle found in this Old Testament text: "Then hear in heaven, and act, and judge Your servants, condemning the wicked, bringing his way on his head, and justifying the righteous by giving him according to his righteousness" (*1 Kings 8:32, NKJV*).

Read Matthew 25:31–46 and John 5:21–29. How did Christ point to the concepts of both condemnation and vindication in the final judgment?

Some claim that the expressions "is not judged" (*John 3:18, NASB*) and "will not be judged" (*John 5:24, NIV*) mean that those who are in Christ are not judged at all. But these expressions imply that believers are not *condemned* in the judgment. Hence the texts should be understood as saying "is not condemned" (*John 3:18, NIV*) and "shall not come into condemnation" (*John 5:24*).

In short, our destiny is determined in our present life. Those in Christ have their vindication at the judgment already assured, and those who are not in Christ remain under condemnation. Describing the judgment (*Matt. 25:31–46*), Christ mentioned the presence not only of the goats (wicked) but also of the sheep (righteous). And the apostle Paul stated explicitly, "For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil" (*2 Cor. 5:10, NRSV*).

While reflecting on the judgment, we should keep in mind that we are saved by grace (*Isa. 55:1, Eph. 2:8–10*), justified by faith (*Gen. 15:6, Rom. 5:1*), and judged by works (*Eccles. 12:14, Matt. 25:31–46, Rev. 20:11–13*). The basis of the judgment process is God's moral law as summarized in the Ten Commandments (*Eccles. 12:13, 14; James 1:25; James 2:8–17*). Our works are the external evidences of the genuineness of our saving experience and, consequently, the elements to be appraised during judgment.

Remember: there is no arbitrary decree from God electing some to be saved and others to be lost. Each one is morally responsible for his or her own destiny.

In the end, the judgment is not the time when God decides to accept or reject us, but the time when God finalizes our choice as to whether or not we have accepted Him—a choice made manifest by our works.

The Pre-Advent Judgment

The concept of judgment before the return of Christ, or what we call a “pre-Advent” judgment, is found in many places in Scripture.

Read Daniel 7:9–14; Matthew 22:1–14; Revelation 11:1, 18, 19; and Revelation 14:6, 7. How do these passages shed light on the notion of a pre-Advent investigative judgment in the heavenly courtroom? What is the significance of such a judgment?

The concept of a pre-Advent investigative judgment of God’s people is grounded in three basic biblical teachings.

One is the notion that all the dead—righteous or unrighteous—remain unconscious in their graves until the final resurrections (*John 5:25–29*).

The second is the existence of a universal judgment of all human beings (*2 Cor. 5:10, Rev. 20:11–13*).

The third is the fact that the first resurrection will be the blessed reward for the righteous, and the second resurrection will be eternal death for the wicked (*John 5:28, 29; Rev. 20:4–6, 12–15*).

What this means is that if all human beings will be judged, they should be judged *prior* to their respective resurrections, because at those resurrections they will receive their final rewards.

The book of Daniel helps us to understand both the time and the nature of that pre-Advent judgment. At the end of the 2,300 symbolic days—in 1844—the heavenly sanctuary would be cleansed (*Dan. 8:14, compare with Heb. 9:23*) and the pre-Advent investigative judgment would begin (*Dan. 7:9–14*), two different ways of expressing the same event. And the judgment is “in favor of the saints of the Most High” (*Dan. 7:22, NKJV*). That is, it’s good news for God’s people.

In Matthew 22:1–14, Jesus spoke of an investigation of the wedding guests before the wedding feast actually started.

And in the book of Revelation, the pre-Advent investigative judgment is referred to in the task of measuring “those who worship” in the temple of God (*Rev. 11:1, NKJV*) and in the announcement that “the hour of His judgment has come” (*Rev. 14:6, 7, NKJV; compare with Rev. 14:14–16*).

How should our knowledge of a judgment in heaven impact how we live here on earth?

The Millennial Judgment

The Bible tells us that at the Second Coming (1) both the living saints and the resurrected saints will “meet the Lord in the air” (*1 Thess. 4:16, 17*); (2) all the saints will be taken to heaven to abide in the heavenly “dwelling places” that He Himself has prepared for them (*John 14:1–3, NRSV*); and (3) only at the end of the millennium will the New Jerusalem come down to this earth and become the everlasting home of the saints (*Rev. 21:1–3, 9–11*). So, during the millennium, while this earth remains desolate, the saints will reign with Christ in heaven (*Jer. 4:23, Rev. 20:4*).

Read 1 Corinthians 6:2, 3 and Revelation 20:4–6, 11–13. Why should the saints participate in the millennial judgment?

The whole judgment process is intended (1) to vindicate God’s character against the accusations of Satan that God is unfair in the way He treats His creatures; (2) to confirm the impartiality of the rewards of the righteous; (3) to demonstrate the justice of the punishments of the wicked; and (4) to dissipate all doubts that could lead toward another rebellion in the universe. In the pre-Advent investigative judgment of the righteous, only the heavenly hosts are involved (*Dan. 7:9, 10*). But during the millennial judgment of the wicked and the fallen angels, the saints themselves also will participate (*1 Cor. 6:3, Jude 6, Rev. 20:4–6*).

The pre-Advent investigative judgment began in 1844 when “‘thrones were put in place. . . . The court was seated, and the books were opened’” (*Dan. 7:9, 10, NKJV*). The millennial judgment, however, will start after the saints are taken to heaven and sit on thrones, and the judgment is committed to them. Then, once more, the heavenly books are opened, and the dead are “judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books” (*Rev. 20:4, 12, NKJV*). This process provides an opportunity for the saints to evaluate the heavenly records and to see God’s fair treatment in all cases. He not only rewards all human beings according to what they deserve based on their own decisions but also explains to them why He does so.

What does it teach us about the character of God that before any of the sleeping lost are resurrected to face the second death, the saved will be involved in the judging process, and no one will be punished until we, too, see the justice and fairness of God? Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.

The Executive Judgment

During the Middle Ages there was a strong tendency to portray God as a severe, punitive Judge. Today the tendency is to describe Him as a loving, permissive Father who never punishes His children. Yet, love without justice will turn into chaos and lawlessness, and justice without love will become oppression and subjugation. God's judging process is a perfect blend of justice and mercy, both of which derive from His unconditional love.

The executive judgment is God's final and irreversible punitive intervention in human history. Limited punitive judgments occurred, for example, in the casting out of Satan and his rebellious angels from heaven (*Rev. 12:7–12*), the driving out of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden (*Genesis 3*), the great Flood (*Genesis 6–8*), the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (*Genesis 19, Jude 7*), the death of the firstborn in Egypt (*Exodus 11, Exodus 12*), and the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira (*Acts 5:1–11*). So, it is no surprise that there also will be an executive judgment of the wicked at the end of human history.

Read 2 Peter 2:4–6 and 2 Peter 3:10–13. How do these texts help us understand the nature of the final executive judgment? How do they imply the idea of the completion of judgment as opposed to its going on forever, which would be a perversion of justice and not an expression of it?

“God's goodness and long forbearance, His patience and mercy exercised to His subjects, will not hinder Him from punishing the sinner who refused to be obedient to His requirements. It is not for a man—a criminal against God's holy law, pardoned only through the great sacrifice He made in giving His Son to die for the guilty because His law was changeless—to dictate to God.”—Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 12, p. 208.

All that God could have done to save humanity from being eternally lost He did, even at a great cost to Himself. Those who are lost ultimately made choices that led them to this unfortunate end. The idea that God's judgment on the lost, even the annihilation of the lost (as opposed to eternal torment), goes against the character of a loving God is simply wrong. It's God's love, and God's love alone, that demands justice, as well.

What does the Cross itself teach us about what God was willing to do in order to save everyone who would be saved?

The Second Death

God is leading human history toward its end-time climax. At the end of the millennium all the wicked dead are raised from their graves to receive their final punitive sentences (*Rev. 20:5, 11–15*). Then, when the whole judging process is completed and nothing else can be added to it, the wicked will acknowledge God’s justice. “With all the facts of the great controversy in view, the whole universe, both loyal and rebellious, with one accord declare: ‘Just and true are Thy ways, Thou King of saints.’ ” And Satan himself “bows down and confesses the justice of his sentence.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 670, 671.

Read Malachi 4:1; Revelation 20:14, 15; and Revelation 21:8. How effective are the “lake of fire” and the “second death”?

The final destruction of Satan and his angels and all the wicked will cleanse the universe from sin and its consequences. And yet, even the final destruction of the wicked is an act of God’s love, not only for the saints but also for the wicked themselves. They would rather die than live in the presence of God who is a “consuming fire” for sin (*Heb. 12:29*).

“They [the lost] would long to flee from that holy place. They would welcome destruction, that they might be hidden from the face of Him who died to redeem them. The destiny of the wicked is fixed by their own choice. Their exclusion from heaven is voluntary with themselves, and just and merciful on the part of God.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 543.

Thus, the final annihilation of sin and sinners—in contrast to the unbiblical theory of their everlasting sufferings in hell—provides a just and proportional punishment for whatever evil people had committed. It also confirms that sin had a beginning and will have an end. Then the whole universe will return to its original perfection, before sin, evil, and disobedience arose mysteriously and without any justification.

Praise the Lord that He, as our “righteous Judge” (*2 Tim. 4:8, NKJV*), will make the fair decision of granting immortality to the righteous and eternal destruction to the wicked.

What would be wrong with the idea that God saves everyone in the end? Why is that such a bad idea?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “Without a Wedding Garment,” pp. 307–319, in *Christ’s Object Lessons*; “Desolation of the Earth,” pp. 653–661; “The Controversy Ended,” pp. 662–673, in *The Great Controversy*.

“In the day of final judgment, every lost soul will understand the nature of his own rejection of truth. The cross will be presented, and its real bearing will be seen by every mind that has been blinded by transgression. Before the vision of Calvary with its mysterious Victim, sinners will stand condemned. Every lying excuse will be swept away. Human apostasy will appear in its heinous character. Men will see what their choice has been. Every question of truth and error in the long-standing controversy will then have been made plain. In the judgment of the universe, God will stand clear of blame for the existence or continuance of evil. It will be demonstrated that the divine decrees are not accessory to sin. There was no defect in God’s government, no cause for disaffection. When the thoughts of all hearts shall be revealed, both the loyal and the rebellious will unite in declaring, ‘Just and true are Thy ways, Thou King of saints. Who shall not fear Thee, O Lord, and glorify Thy name? . . . for Thy judgments are made manifest.’ Rev. 15:3, 4.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 58.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ “If you cling to self, refusing to yield your will to God, you are choosing death. To sin, wherever found, God is a consuming fire. If you choose sin, and refuse to separate from it, the presence of God, which consumes sin, must consume you.”—Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, p. 62. How does this quote help us understand the nature of the executive judgment?
- ❷ Dwell on the idea (presented at the end of Tuesday’s study) that not one of the lost will face final judgment until after the redeemed have been part of the judging process. Again, what does this teach us about the openness and transparency of God? For a universe in which love reigns, why is this transparency so important?
- ❸ How will the participation of the saints in the millennial judgment comfort them in regard to their loved ones who will be lost?

Two Dreams in Angola

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Every time he went to church, little William Frederico João Lumbo seemed to hear the preacher say the same phrase. The big preacher stood behind the pulpit in the church in Angola. He raised a hand into the air, and thundered, “Those who do not live to serve God are not fit to live!”

The preacher’s words made a big impression on his young mind. But the world outside the church also made a big impression, and he decided that he would rather dance than go to church. At age 14, he formed a dance group and performed at parties and school events in Angola’s capital, Luanda.

Even though William enjoyed dancing, something didn’t seem right. He felt an emptiness inside, and he remembered the words of the preacher, “Those who do not live to serve God are not fit to live.”

The joy from dancing faded, and William began to smoke and drink. But he felt increasingly empty. One day, he prayed desperately, “I am not living to serve You, and I am not fit to live. Help!”

Shortly after the prayer, a friend gave William a flash drive with a sermon on it. William wanted the flash drive because, on it, the friend also had saved a video of him dancing.

The sermon touched William’s heart. He fell to his knees and asked for forgiveness. He decided to go to church. All churches were closed in Angola because of COVID-19, and William ended up in an Adventist house church.

A big surprise awaited William. The leader of the house church, Filipe, had had two dreams about William over the past two nights. In the first dream, Filipe was standing beside a big tree, and, in his hand, he held a small branch. He needed to somehow connect the branch to the tree so it could grow again. In the second dream, Filipe was standing beside a big river. A small river flowed beside the big river, and Felipe somehow needed to connect the small river to the big river.

“You are the small branch that needs to be connected to the big tree,” Filipe told William. “The big tree is Jesus, who is the Tree of Life. You are the small river, and the big river is Jesus. You need to be connected to Jesus, who is the River of Life.”

William could scarcely believe his ears. “Jesus wants me to be connected to Him?” he asked.

As William worshiped at the house church, peace and joy began to fill the emptiness in his heart. He decided to be connected only to Jesus. Today, William couldn’t be happier. He lives only to serve God.



This mission story illustrates Spiritual Growth Objective No. 5 of the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s “I Will Go” strategic plan, “To disciple individuals and families into Spirit-filled lives.” Read more: IWillGo2020.org.

Key Texts: *Isaiah 35:4; Daniel 7:9, 10, 13, 14, 22, 26, 27; Revelation 20:7–15*

Part I: Overview

God is our Judge (*Isa. 35:4*). As our Judge, He is impartial in His judgment. This is good news for us. As fallen beings with imperfect judgment and a tendency toward partiality and prejudice, we tend to transport some folks into heaven and then refuse others entry. God knows human hearts, thinking, and motives; thereby, He alone can deliver to every human being an unbiased and just sentence.

Through His judgments, God restores His glory and vindicates His character. He does so openly and consistently so that everyone can know who He is (*Ps. 34:8*). God wants all intelligent beings in the universe to understand His purposes and to know that He deals with evil fairly, punishes the wicked appropriately, and saves sinners justly (*Ezek. 18:21, 23, 32; Ezek. 33:11; Rom. 3:21–26*).

The gospel according to God's judgment focuses on the salvation of repentant sinners and thus presents good news about the God of love, who, out of His love, judges and brings a lasting solution to the problems of death, suffering, pain, injustice, and violence, which are all results of sin (*Rom. 6:23; 2 Thess. 1:9; Rev. 21:3, 4*).

In the end, God will fully restore harmony and peace throughout the entire universe (*Eph. 1:10*). Evil and anything or anyone who associates with it will be eliminated and destroyed (*Matt. 25:41, 46; Rev. 20:13–15*). Everyone who totally and voluntarily submitted to God, acknowledging Him as his or her Creator, Redeemer, Lord, and King will receive everlasting life, joyfully serving and worshiping Him forever (*Exod. 34:6, 7; Dan. 7:14, 27; Nah. 1:7; John 3:16, 17; Eph. 1:4–10; Phil. 2:10, 11; Rev. 15:3, 4*). Thus, the original abundant life of joy, happiness, and peace will be restored and never again be disrupted by any form of disobedience or rebellion (*Nah. 1:9; John 10:10; Rom. 2:7; 1 Tim. 1:16; 2 Tim. 4:7, 8; Titus 2:11–14*).

Part II: Commentary

Central and Cosmic Judgment on the Cross

In creating a solution to the problem of sin, God is a Master Designer. Christ's death on the cross is at the solution's very center. Different attestations and judgments are revealed in the Cross event: (1) God was vindicated—Golgotha proves that God is the God of love, truth, justice, holiness, order, and freedom, and He is the Warrantor of peace, joy, and prosperity (*Ps. 51:4, John 3:16*,

Rom. 3:21–26); (2) Satan was judged and sentenced (*John 16:11, Heb. 2:14*); (3) sin was judged and condemned (*Rom. 8:3*); (4) humanity was judged, and its condemnation was taken by Christ upon Himself (*Isa. 53:4–6, 2 Cor. 5:21, Gal. 3:13*), and provision to live eternally was made for those who accept Jesus Christ as their personal Savior (*1 John 5:12, 13*). God wants every person to live (*Ezek. 18:30–32; 1 Tim. 2:2, 3*).

Pre-Advent or Investigative Judgment

The Bible testifies that when God calls the heavenly court into session prior to His second coming (*Dan. 7:9, 10, 13, 14, 22, 26, 27; Rev. 11:19; Rev. 14:7; compare with Matt. 22:1–14*), the primary purpose will be to legally and eternally secure our place within the heavenly family. John 14:2, 3 reassures us that Jesus is not building our places in heaven as a Master Builder, shaping a nice house or mansion for us (He could do that in a matter of seconds), but He is legally securing our place in heaven before the representatives of the whole universe. This legal proceeding takes a lot of time, as attested in Daniel 7:9, 10, 13, 14, 22, 26, 27. Jesus, as the true Witness, will fairly present our individual cases and proclaim in front of the whole universe that we, as believers in Him, are His; we have accepted His death to purify us from sin; His grace is sufficient for us, and the power of His grace works in us.

Jesus secures our salvation legally, openly, publicly, and transparently before all inhabitants of the universe, so that no one during eternity will ever raise the question of something being done secretly or partially. Jesus makes it plain that the saved are trustworthy people and will fit into the heavenly family because God's amazing grace is a transforming grace that changes them. God wants us to be accepted into heaven without any doubts or question marks.

Therefore, given the nature of this investigative judgment, it also can be called the affirmative judgment that certifies, seals, and ratifies what was done during a person's lifetime. Affirmative judgment is a confirmation of lifetime decisions.

Different terms can be used to explain various aspects of the pre-Advent judgment: (1) affirmative judgment—especially from the perspective of the redeemed because Jesus takes our cases and affirms in front of the universe our relationship with Him; (2) revelatory judgment—Jesus reveals to the entire heavenly family who God's true followers are and unmask the antichrist, who plays at being God and His agent of salvation; (3) demonstrative judgment—God presents facts to heavenly beings and shows them our attitudes toward Him, His law, people, nature, and sin, and He explains how He deals with sin, evil, the devil, and all who followed Satan; (4) investigative judgment—angels and heavenly beings need this judgment in order to have additional insights into the great controversy about why God saves some and others He does not accept into heaven. Thus, the books are opened for the sake

of heaven's celestial citizens (*Dan. 7:10*), demonstrating the objectivity of God's decisions.

The pre-Advent judgment does not pronounce a new sentence in contrast to what we experience in our daily life. Jesus will affirm God's saving activity or the condemnation of a particular person. We do not need to be afraid of God's pre-Advent judgment; because at that judgment, He confirms, reveals, discloses, and demonstrates to the heavenly world the decisions we made for Him during our lifetime. He will not add anything else to our decisions, and neither will He alter them. As the One who is faithful and true, He testifies for His people that we are His (*Rom. 8:31, Rev. 3:14*).

The Last or Annihilation Judgment

The final judgment on earth occurs at the end of the millennium, when the wicked will be resurrected. They gather to attack God and His people in the New Jerusalem (*Rev. 20:7–10, Rev. 21:1–3*). God Himself is seated on the great white throne, and He judges all unrepentant creatures (*Rev. 20:11, 12*). In the light of the Cross, the history of sin and salvation will be displayed. Each stage of the rebellion against God, as well as His wonderful plan of redemption—from the beginning of the rebellion of Satan in heaven to the supreme sacrifice of Jesus on the cross to the final victory at the Second Coming—will be shown. Also, all the wicked will see their lives in the light of the Cross.

The cross of Jesus will be elevated above the throne of God, as Ellen G. White states: "Above the throne is revealed the cross; and like a panoramic view appear the scenes of Adam's temptation and fall, and the successive steps in the great plan of redemption."—*The Great Controversy*, p. 666. The wicked will see what God was doing for their salvation, how many chances they rejected, how they despised His grace in their pride and ignorance. Their stubbornness and indifference will be keenly unmasked, and they will see the true nature of their rebellion.

Satan will lead all sinners into a final, desperate attack against the Holy City. Their wicked character is thus proven and demonstrated once again. Even the best information about God, His character and actions, will not change these beings. They are wicked through and through. There is only one solution: annihilation of evil in all its forms. Fire from heaven will fall and will definitively do away with sin, evil, and rebellion (*Rev. 20:9, 10*). This cleansing fire will constitute the annihilative judgment, the final, eternal, nonreversible death. For those who rejected Jesus as their Savior and stayed in their stubborn attitudes, there is no hope. Their nature was to destroy. God needs, therefore, out of love, to destroy those destroyers. The nature of this judgment is the final execution. God must respond to the destructive behavior of unrepentant humans, evil angels, and the devil.

If He did not respond, evil would triumph, and life would be jeopardized and ultimately annihilated. Sin, sinners, and the devil with his angels are wiped out, and the earth is purged of evil (*Rev. 20:9, 13–15; compare with 2 Pet. 3:7, 10–13*).

After cutting off what was sick and sinful without possible healing, God acts as Re-Creator of life. He will create the new heavens and the new earth (*Revelation 21; Revelation 22*). Salvation and life will be secured for all eternity. Sin will never occur again. All intelligent beings in the universe will serve God faithfully out of love and gratitude because they know the goodness, love, justice, and truth of God. Love, peace, harmony, joy, justice, freedom, order, and truth will reign for all eternity. God as the Lord of lords and King of kings will be loved, admired, followed, obeyed, and worshiped forever and ever by everyone (*Dan. 7:27; Revelation 21; Revelation 22*).

Thus, the theology of God's judgment is the ultimate revelation and demonstration of the love, truth, and justice of God (*Phil. 2:10, 11; Rev. 15:2–4*). God's government is open; God's ways are demonstrated and proven to be right and just. God is just while justifying sinners who accepted Him; trusted Him as their personal Savior; and said no to sin, wickedness, Satan, and fallen angels.

Part III: Life Application

- 1. Why is God's judgment so needed and crucial in the context of the great controversy and the interest of the universe in the question of sin?**

- 2. How do we differentiate between the positive divine judgments and the negative judgments?**

3. How do we live in anticipation of God's judgment without being frightened by it?

Notes
