

11. The Day of Judgment Has Come

Who Will Be the Judge?

It is clear from Scripture that all people will experience the Day of Judgment. This is vividly described in Revelation 20:11-15, where we read

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

This passage reminds us of what was prophesied already in the Old Testament:

As I looked, thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze. A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him. Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court was seated and the books were opened... In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an

everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed (Dan 7:9-11, 13-14).

The “Ancient of Days” is generally seen as a manifestation of God. The son of man coming with the clouds is unmistakably Jesus Christ. While God presides as Judge and never relinquishes his position, it is clear that the judgment is given to our Lord Jesus Christ.

Right after pardoning a woman caught in adultery, Christ says to the Pharisees, “You judge by human standards; I pass judgment on no one. But if I do judge, my decisions are right, because I am not alone. I stand with the Father, who sent me” (John 8:15-16). The Ancient of Days and the Son of Man will render the same verdict.

In Lord’s Day 20 of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, we confess, “In all my sorrow and persecution, I lift up my head and eagerly await as judge from heaven the very same person who before has submitted himself to the judgment of God for my sake, and has removed the curse from me...” (*Book of Praise*, p. 494). This “very same person” is our Lord Jesus Christ.

In Scripture, we also find this comforting message: “...the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father” (John 5:22). In his sermon at Cornelius’ house, Peter also mentions that “[he] commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he (Jesus) is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead” (Acts 10:42).

Christ is the Judge, appointed by the Father for this purpose, and his judgment will be in accordance with the will of the Father. There is not even a hint of two judges, each coming to a different verdict.

How Can God judge all people at the same time?

The question has often been asked, “How can God judge all people at one time? Will there not be billions who need to be judged, and how will this take place?” The judgment will be massive; can it still be personal? The logistics are mind-boggling, it seems.

Of course, it is true that with God nothing is impossible. We confess in Article 37 of the *Belgic Confession* that all people will appear in person before the great Judge (*Book of Praise*, p. 471). The Bible tells us that we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ. We have to make our “appearance” and that word denotes (as it does in law) that we must *personally* stand before the judge at his appointed time. An appearance is an official moment when a judgment is pronounced and a verdict is made known.

What makes us wonder is the notion of a personal experience. Will there not be an incredible line-up, and will this personal appearance before God not take a great amount of time? I made a textual reference here to Revelation 20:12-13, which is already quoted above, and we lift out the word that all will be *standing* before the throne. It is an important moment.

Article 37 in the Confession also implies that, at the final judgment, “...the secrets and hypocrisies of men will then be publicly uncovered in the sight of all.” The trial will be an open one, and the evidence will be made public. This can be a very frightening thought. At the last judgment, all secrets will be uncovered and nothing will remain hidden.

This knowledge must make us very careful that we do not pile up sins, especially secret and hidden sins. All things will come to the light. We will be deeply ashamed of ourselves. But there will be no gloating from others, for all people will be in the same situation. The point is that we now, in this life already, confess our secret sins to God and to those affected by them on earth. Then, even though they may be made known on the Day of Judgment, they will not count against us. We need to sincerely pray, “Forgive my hidden faults” (Ps 19:12).

We will leave the logistics to the Lord. He is able to judge all people personally, yet simultaneously. For each one of us, it will indeed be a personal experience. Our lives as we lived them on this earth will be judged. As Paul writes, “...we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things *done while in the body*, whether good or bad” (2 Cor 5:10).

Note that Paul writes about things done whether *good* or bad. Our good works will also be noted. We will not be “credited” for these good works, for Christ worked them in us. All our works are works of grace and never of merit. Christ alone receives the glory. But it will be noted that we by God’s grace did serve the Lord and furthered his kingdom.

Why is a Judgment Required?

More than once, I have been asked why there must still be a judgment when all who die already know whether they are saved or not. As we saw earlier, those who are saved go to heaven; those who are not saved go to Sheol. Even before we die, we may have certainty of faith that we are forgiven in Jesus Christ.

If the outcome is already clear, why have a judgment? Is that not a waste of time? Moreover, is it not rather illogical and laughable? Why appear before the judge when the verdict is already known?

These are good questions that help us understand why a judgment is required. In every trial, evidence is presented and weighed by a jury and/or judge before a verdict is made. This can take quite some time, especially if the jurors cannot agree. By the time the verdict is officially made known, however, the accused may already know what it will be. The lawyers may have figured out in which direction things will go. Still, the matter is not settled until an official verdict is rendered and a penalty set.

At this verdict, the evidence is presented once more. The judge makes a final decision and determines a just punishment. Only then is the case closed. This is also the function of the Day of Judgment. We need to hear the evidence against us, and the verdict must be officially proclaimed. “Guilty as charged.” That is the moment when we will see more clearly than ever before how great our sins and misery really are. At the same time, we will hear the other amazing verdict: “Not guilty, redeemed in Christ.”

That is the moment when we will grasp, as never before, “how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that

surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God” (Eph 3:18-19). We will finally see the true depth of our misery and the real height of God’s love.

The Day of Judgment is therefore not an after-thought or appendix but a crucial moment on our path to eternal glory. We need this day for our benefit and God’s glory. The shame over our sin will be covered by the joy over our salvation, and God will be vindicated in his Son, Jesus Christ. Glory be to the Triune God.

We will be judged but not condemned

I particularly like the way the Heidelberg Catechism formulates the matter. Speaking about the forgiveness of sins, we confess, “I believe that God because of Christ’s satisfaction will no more remember my sins, nor my sinful nature against which I have to struggle all my life, but will graciously grant me the righteousness of Christ that I may never come into condemnation” (*Book of Praise*, p. 496).

We will enter into judgment, but never come into condemnation. This is simply amazing. What will really stand out on the Day of Judgment is the efficacy and benefit of Christ’s one sacrifice on the cross. Not only has Christ fulfilled the law in our place, but he also underwent the full penalty of the law, especially on the cross. The Day of Judgment is about us. But even more it is about Christ.