

THE JUDGMENT OF THE SHEEP AND THE GOATS AND ADDENDUM: AN OVERVIEW OF FUTURE JUDGMENTS

έρχόμενον κρῖναι ζῶντας καὶ νεκρούς...

He shall come to judge the quick and the dead...

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The Nicene Creed culminates with the triumphant declaration, “He [Christ] shall come to judge the living and the dead” (έρχόμενον κρῖναι ζῶντας καὶ νεκρούς). This doctrine, the return of Christ in judgment, is a key component of the Bible’s presentation of Christ. Addressing the eschatological judgments revealed in Scripture, this article consists of two parts. First, it includes a discussion about the judgment of the sheep and the goats from the Olivet Discourse. Second, to provide a greater understanding of all the future judgments, it concludes with an overview of each end-time judgment. As the reader will observe, Nicaea’s declaration of Christ’s return in judgment and glory is thoroughly biblical and worthy of consideration today.

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The Judgment of the Sheep and the Goats¹

Everything in the Olivet Discourse progresses toward a climactic judgment. Motifs of judgment involving the separation of believers from unbelievers run right through the discourse. We have seen already that all three of the parables in the discourse contain graphic symbols of coming judgment. And the great

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overriding theme of the whole discourse—the sudden appearing of Jesus Christ—is continually portrayed as the ultimate event that will precipitate and signal the arrival of a massive, catastrophic judgment. Now Christ gives a powerful description of that judgment:

When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. (Matt 25:31–33)

No one in Scripture had more to say about judgment than Jesus. He repeatedly warned about impending doom for the unrepentant (Luke 13:3, 5). He spoke of hell far more than of heaven and always in the most vivid and disturbing terms. Most of what we know about the everlasting doom of sinners came from the lips of the Savior. And none of the biblical descriptions of judgment are more severe or more intense than those given by Jesus.

Yet He always spoke of such things in the most tender and compassionate tones. He pleaded with sinners to turn from their sins, to be reconciled to God, and to take refuge in Him from the coming judgment. He better than anyone knew the high cost of sin and the severity of divine wrath against the sinner, for He would bear the full force of that wrath on behalf of those He redeemed. Therefore when He spoke of such things, He always spoke with the utmost empathy and not the least hostility. He even wept as he looked over Jerusalem, knowing that the city and the entire nation of Israel would reject Him as their Messiah and would soon suffer complete destruction.

He saw the city and wept over it, saying, “If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment around you, surround you and close you in on every side, and level you, and your children within you, to the ground; and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not know the time of your visitation.” (Luke 19:41–44)

In an important sense, the entire Olivet Discourse is simply an expansion of that compassionate plea. Beginning from the same starting point—a lament about the imminent destruction of Jerusalem—Christ simply broadens His perspective and gives the disciples an extended appeal that encompasses the whole eschatological future, right up to His return and the judgment that ensues. The same spirit that prompted Christ’s weeping over the city of Jerusalem therefore permeates and colors the entire Olivet Discourse. And Matthew, who was there to hear it all firsthand, recorded it in his Gospel, where it stands as a beacon to all sinners throughout the entire age. It is the Lord’s final tender plea for repentance before it is too late.

Looking back over the discourse, we see that all His various urgings to be faithful and all His admonitions to be prepared boil down to this: they are a compassionate call to repentance and faith in Him. He is warning us to be prepared for His coming

because when He returns, He will bring final judgment. And as He concludes His discourse, He describes that judgment in detail.

This remaining part of the Olivet Discourse is one of the most severe and sobering warnings about judgment in all of Scripture. Christ the Great Shepherd is the Judge, and He separates His sheep from the goats. These words of Christ are not recorded in any of the other Gospels. But Matthew, intent on portraying Christ as King, here shows Him seated on His earthly throne. In fact, this judgment is His first act following His glorious return to earth, suggesting that judgment is His first order of business as *earthly* ruler (cf. Ps 2:8–12). This event therefore inaugurates the millennial kingdom and is distinct from the Great White Throne judgment described in Revelation 20, which occurs *after* the millennial age is brought to a close. Here Christ is judging those alive at His coming, separating the sheep (true believers) from the goats (unbelievers). The goats represent the same class of people who are portrayed as evil servants, unwise virgins, and an unfaithful steward in the immediately preceding parables.

The Judge

Christ Himself is the Judge in the events described here. This is in keeping with what He said on another occasion: “For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son, that all should honor the Son just as they honor the Father” (John 5:22–23).

Thus, the same compassionate One who wept and pleaded with sinners to be reconciled to God will one day be their sovereign Judge.

And He will judge with “a rod of iron” (Rev 19:15); He will “dash them to pieces like a potter’s vessel” (Ps 2:9; Rev 2:27). The judgment will be fierce, pictured in Revelation 19:15 with the imagery of Christ “tread[ing] the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God.”

He will return with a large company of angels: “The Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him” (Matt 25:31). Several passages of Scripture teach that the angels will play an assisting role in the judgment. According to 2 Thessalonians 1:7–8, “The Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with *His mighty angels*, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ” (emphasis added). Matthew 24:31 says the angels will “gather together the elect from the four winds.” Believers who have died or were caught up in the Rapture will also be part of the company that returns with Christ: “Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of His saints, to execute judgment on all” (Jude 14–15; cf. Zech 14:5). “When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory” (Col 3:4).

Here’s an interesting fact: this passage in Matthew 25:31–46 marks the first time in any of Christ’s recorded statements that He explicitly refers to Himself as King. Throughout His ministry He had much to say about the kingdom of God; but He did not expressly feature Himself as King until He did so in this context, speaking privately to the disciples. (Later, before Pilate, He publicly acknowledged that He is King—John 18:37.)

The title Christ most frequently applied to Himself was “Son of Man.” Even here He employs that expression, but only to say that the Son of Man will come in His glory and subsequently take *His* throne (v. 31). In verse 34 he calls Himself “King” for the first time on record. Moreover, He declares that when He takes His rightful place as King, His first duty will be to execute righteous judgment, and thus to determine who will have the right to enter His kingdom.

The Time

Scripture is precise about the timing of this judgment. It will take place “when the Son of Man comes in His glory” (v. 31). Everything in the account suggests that His judgment will begin at the very moment He appears (cf. 24:30–41). This accords perfectly with the prophecy about His coming in Revelation 19:11–21:

Now I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war. His eyes were like a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns. He had a name written that no one knew except Himself. He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. And the armies in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, followed Him on white horses. Now out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should strike the nations. And He Himself will rule them with a rod of iron. He Himself treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. And He has on His robe and on His thigh a name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS. Then I saw an angel standing in the sun; and he cried with a loud voice, saying to all the birds that fly in the midst of heaven, “Come and gather together for the supper of the great God, that you may eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and of those who sit on them, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, both small and great.” And I saw the beast, the kings of the earth, and their armies, gathered together to make war against Him who sat on the horse and against His army. Then the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who worked signs in his presence, by which he deceived those who received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped his image. These two were cast alive into the lake of fire burning with brimstone. And the rest were killed with the sword which proceeded from the mouth of Him who sat on the horse. And all the birds were filled with their flesh.

So when Christ appears, the opportunity for salvation will be gone forever. The day of mercy already spent, Christ will summarily cut off the wicked without remedy. Like the evil servant, they will be caught unawares by their Lord’s return. Like the five foolish virgins, they will find the door closed and themselves locked out. Like the foolish and lazy steward, they will have no legitimate plea by which to excuse themselves. For them, the day of salvation is over. Christ is returning to establish an earthly kingdom, and none but the sheep will be permitted to enter it.

The Place

How do we know Christ will be seated on an *earthly* throne? Everything in the context points to this. He comes to earth in glory first; “*then* He will sit on the throne of His glory” (Matt 25:31, emphasis added). This marks the establishment of the earthly kingdom, emanating from Jerusalem, that is spoken of so frequently in the Old Testament Messianic prophecies. This will be the fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant, given in 2 Samuel 7:12–16, 1 Chronicles 7:11–15, Psalm 89:3–4, and Zechariah 14:9. He will sit “upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever” (Isa 9:7). “He shall execute judgment and righteousness in the earth. In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell safely” (Jer 33:15–16). This signifies the fulfillment of the promise the angel gave Mary: “You will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and *the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David*. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:31–33, emphasis added).

David’s throne was an earthly one, in Jerusalem, and Scripture identifies Jerusalem as the place to which Christ will return, as well as the location of His throne:

In that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which faces Jerusalem on the east. And the Mount of Olives shall be split in two, from east to west, making a very large valley; half of the mountain shall move toward the north and half of it toward the south.... And in that day it shall be that living waters shall flow from Jerusalem, half of them toward the eastern sea and half of them toward the western sea; in both summer and winter it shall occur. And the LORD shall be King over all the earth. In that day it shall be—“The LORD is one,” and His name one. All the land shall be turned into a plain from Geba to Rimmon south of Jerusalem. Jerusalem shall be raised up and inhabited in her place from Benjamin’s Gate to the place of the First Gate and the Corner Gate, and from the Tower of Hananel to the king’s winepresses. The people shall dwell in it; and no longer shall there be utter destruction, but Jerusalem shall be safely inhabited. (Zech 14:4, 8–11)

There is no good reason to interpret those promises in any sense except the literal one. Just as His ascension was literal and bodily, so shall He literally come in bodily form at His return. And since that is so, there is no valid reason to see His throne as anything but the literal reestablishment of David’s earthly kingdom. His throne will be situated in Jerusalem, and Christ will rule over all the earth, finally bringing about the literal fulfillment of all the Old Testament millennial prophecies, as well as all the promises God made to Abraham about the land of Israel and all the promises He made to David about the throne.

But before the kingdom is established, a dreadful judgment must take place. Joel wrote of it centuries before Christ:

Let the nations be wakened, and come up to the Valley of Jehoshaphat; for there I will sit to judge all the surrounding nations. Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Come, go down; for the winepress is full, the vats overflow—for their wickedness is great. Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision. The sun and moon will grow dark, and the stars will diminish their brightness. The LORD also will roar from Zion, and utter His voice from Jerusalem; the heavens and earth will shake; but the LORD will be a shelter for His people, and the strength of the children of Israel. So you shall know that I am the LORD your God, dwelling in Zion My holy mountain. Then Jerusalem shall be holy, and no aliens shall ever pass through her again. (Joel 3:12–17)

Thus, God Himself pledged that the sheep would be separated from the goats. And none but those who love Christ will be permitted to enter or pass through His kingdom.

The Subjects

Some suggest that the subjects of this judgment are political entities—literal nations. After all, Matthew 25:32 says, “All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another.” (The passage cited above from Joel also speaks to “nations.”)

But the Greek term translated “nations” in Matthew 25:32 is *ethna* (from which we derive our word *ethnic*), and it speaks of *peoples*, not political or national entities. Furthermore, the context makes clear that individuals are in view in this judgment:

Then the King will say to those on His right hand, “Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.” Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, “Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?” And the King will answer and say to them, “Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.” Then He will also say to those on the left hand, “Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.” Then they also will answer Him, saying, “Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?” Then He will answer them, saying, “Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.” And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. (Matt 25:34–46)

That describes a judgment based on actions for which people are individually responsible. The punishment also applies to individuals, not corporate groups. The notion that political entities could be the subjects of this judgment is completely foreign to the text.

The Process

The focus and goal of this judgment is the separation of the righteous from the unrighteous. By this judgment is brought to pass what Christ prophesied earlier in the discourse when He said, “Two men will be in the field: one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken and the other left” (24:40–41). This judgment also fulfills what was represented by the closing of the banquet door to the foolish virgins.

Notice that the judgment is not designed for Christ to *discover* who are sheep and who are goats; He knows this at the start of the judgment, when He seats the sheep on the right hand (the place of favor) and the goats on the left (the place of disfavor) (25:33). “The Lord [already] knows those who are His” (2 Tim 2:19). “He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out” (John 10:3). The purpose of the judgment is therefore only to render a formal verdict between the sheep and the goats.

The significance of the sheep-and-goat imagery would have been obvious to the disciples. They were familiar with the sight of sheep and goats being herded together. (The same practice can be observed in the Middle East today.) A single shepherd can easily oversee both kinds of creatures together, but the character of the two animals are markedly different. Sheep are docile, gentle creatures.

Goats are often unruly and hyperactive. So the two cannot easily be kept in the same fold at night. A shepherd would therefore separate the animals in the evening before closing them in pens.

The Great Shepherd will undertake a similar process before the launch of His millennial kingdom. The believing sheep will be welcomed into their domain—a kingdom full of blessings that will never end. And the unbelieving goats will be sent to a place of punishment that will never end.

The Evidence

Jesus as Judge cites the evidence that proves who is fit for the kingdom and who is not. It is the testimony of what they thought of Jesus, as evidenced by how they have treated His brethren.

Many imagine support for a doctrine of salvation by works in Jesus’ words to the faithful. But the context clearly rules out such an interpretation, because our Lord makes clear that their destiny was settled and the kingdom prepared for them by the gracious decree of a sovereign God “from the foundation of the world” (Matt 25:34). In other words, their inheritance was settled in eternity past, long ages before they had done any good or evil, “[so] that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls” (Rom 9:11).

So the words of Christ underscore the biblical truth of divine election. The sheep are sheep by the grace of God alone, not because of anything they have done to make themselves worthy.

Yet their deeds are clear *evidence* of their election. These deeds are the fruit of faith. And therefore works are fitting evidence to be cited either for or against people in judgment (cf. Rom 2:5–10). Christ is in effect saying, “You are the chosen children of My Father, and your faith is made clear by the service you have rendered to Me. Welcome into My kingdom” (v. 40).

The works He cites involve compassion shown to His people by ministering to them when they are hungry, thirsty, alienated, naked, sick, or imprisoned. Such good deeds are “pure and undefiled religion,” the truest evidence of a vibrant, living faith (Jas 1:27). The one who lacks such deeds reveals “dead” faith, not the living kind (cf. Jas 2:15–17). The apostle John said something similar: “Whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:17–18).

So Christ is not suggesting that such good works are *meritorious* for salvation. But they are vital evidence that the principle of eternal life really exists within a person.

Notice that those who receive the King’s commendation are surprised (Matt 25:37–39). They seem almost unaware that their deeds constituted service to Christ. Much less were they thinking they might have earned his favor by such works. The good deeds were merely the natural outflow of a heart of faith.

The Condemnation

The goats are consigned to eternal punishment on similar grounds. They have proved by their works that they are “cursed” (v. 41). Christ no more condemns these people solely because they failed to do good works than He saves the others because of their works. The goats are accursed because they are wicked unbelievers. Their unfitness for the kingdom stems from a constitutional sinfulness, not merely from a shortage of philanthropic good works. They despise the King, and their contempt for Him is clearly displayed in their treatment of His people. These are Christ-rejecting unbelievers, not merely people who failed to be altruistic enough.

They are as surprised as the righteous ones were about Christ’s verdict. They protest that they have not consciously or deliberately slighted Christ, but Christ exposes their guilt by calling to mind their treatment of His people—or rather their total indifference (vv. 44–45). His words of condemnation to them are an exact but inverted echo of His earlier commendation of the righteous.

The goats are eternally separated from all that is good and righteous, and they are consigned forever to “the everlasting tire prepared for the devil and his angels” (v. 41). Christ describes hell as a place of “everlasting punishment” (v. 46) from which there is no relief or respite forever. The English translation of this verse speaks of “everlasting punishment” and “eternal life,” but in the Greek text the same word is used for both “everlasting” and “eternal.” It is the word *aiōnios*, which denotes something perpetual, something never-ending. The double use of the word establishes a deliberate parallel. Christ thereby signifies that the punishment of the wicked is eternal in the same sense as the reward of the righteous. This verse therefore overturns the view of those who believe the wicked will simply be eradicated from existence. Here and throughout Scripture we are taught that the torment of hell is as

endless and unremitting as the blessedness of heaven (cf. v. 41; Dan 12:2; Mark 9:43–48; Luke 16:22–26; 2 Thess 1:9; Rev 14:11; 20:10).

The millennial kingdom will cover the entire earth; so those excluded will not even be permitted to remain alive on earth. “They will go away into everlasting punishment” (emphasis added).

The righteous, however, are admitted to “eternal life.” They will enter the kingdom in an unglorified state and then be glorified at the end of the thousand years.² Their admission to the millennial kingdom is the threshold of eternal life for them. Although they enter the kingdom in an unglorified state, there is no reason to assume they will subsequently die. With the earth under the rule of righteousness, the human life span will be restored to the antediluvian norm—and probably even longer (cf. Isa 65:20). All those who enter the kingdom could therefore survive the whole thousand years, after which they will be glorified and enter fully into the eternal state. Thus entering the kingdom, they are said to enter “into eternal life.”

The future of the unrighteous and the future of the righteous could hardly be more starkly different. The implication of this is plain: the time to think deeply about one’s destiny is now. The time to prepare for judgment is now. The day of salvation is now. And those who wait until Christ returns will find it is already too late. We don’t know the day or the hour of His return. But the time is fast approaching.

It’s time to get ready:

Watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house is coming—in the evening, at midnight, at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning—lest, coming suddenly, he find you sleeping. And what I say to you, I say to all: Watch! (Mark 13:35–37)

Addendum: Overview of Future Judgments³

The Bible clearly teaches that all people will face a judgment day before God when His judgment will be all that matters. A day of reckoning is coming when all will stand before the Creator to account for every thought and deed.

God is the sovereign, holy, and righteous Creator of the universe. Man is His creation, a volitional being who is obligated to serve God and live in conformity to His righteous laws and commands. Man is not an autonomous being. Everything he is and does must be measured against his Creator. Because God is perfectly holy, He cannot allow sin to go unpunished. Judgment, therefore, is a divine necessity. Moral

² This would explain how the earth is populated in the kingdom. Children born to these people during the thousand years would therefore need redemption. Perhaps that is why at the end of the millennial kingdom, when Satan is released for a little while, there will still be people susceptible to his deception (Rev 20:3). After he is released, he will even be able to garner followers for one last futile rebellion (vv. 7–9).

³ This section has been adapted and republished with permission from its original occurrence in John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 864–70. Special thanks go to Michael J. Vlach for his initial contribution to produce this discussion on future judgments.

creatures must stand before God someday to account for their deeds and motives: “And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (Heb 4:13).

As with other aspects of eschatology, God’s judgments are multifaceted, occurring in stages. Some judgments of God such as the global flood judgment, His judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah, and past historical judgments on Israel and Judah have already occurred. Judgments described in Romans 1:18–32 have gone on throughout all human history as God’s wrath has fallen on corrupt societies. Plus, there is a sense in which the wrath of God already remains on the unbeliever (John 3:36). The focus of this section, however, is on future judgments.

The Judgment Seat of Christ

All Christians are headed for a day of judgment before Jesus Christ. Scripture explicitly mentions the judgment seat of Christ in two places; in each, Paul is addressing Christians:

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. (2 Cor 5:10)

Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. (Rom 14:10)

In both cases, the Greek word for “judgment” is *bēma*. In ancient times, a *bēma* was a raised platform or step used in athletic or political arenas. Rulers or judges would ascend the *bēma* to render decisions in legal cases. Pilate judged Jesus from his *bēma* seat (Matt 27:19; John 19:13). In athletic events, an authority figure would be elevated to a *bēma* to judge the competition and award the winners.

Scripture reveals several truths about the judgment seat of Christ. First, Jesus is the Judge who presides over this *bēma* judgment. Second Corinthians 5:10 states that this is a judgment seat “of Christ.” Also, since the Father has granted all judgment to the Son (John 5:22, 27), little doubt exists that the “judgment seat of God” in Romans 14:10 also involves Jesus.

Second, the subjects of this judgment are Christians. In both 2 Corinthians 5:10 and Romans 14:10, Paul addresses Christians in Rome and Corinth. There will be other judgments, including the Great White Throne judgment for unbelievers at a later time (Rev 20:11–15), but the judgment here is for Christians. In 1 Corinthians 3:11–15, Paul speaks of a judgment for Christians who have Jesus Christ as their foundation.

This judgment results in rewards for what a Christian has done with his or her life—for deeds good or bad (2 Cor 5:10). This is a whole-life evaluation. The “good” refers to those works done in the power of the Holy Spirit that bring glory to God. The “bad” refers to worthless deeds that do not bring God honor, works done in the

flesh (Gal 5:19–21). This evaluation of good and bad deeds is further explained in 1 Corinthians 3:12–15:

Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—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. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

The “gold, silver, [and] precious stones” here are the “good” of 2 Corinthians 5:10. Likewise, the “wood, hay, [and] straw” represent the “bad.” The Lord Jesus with his judgment of fire “will test what sort of work each one has done” (1 Cor 3:13). Good works will lead to a reward (1 Cor 3:14), but bad works will be burned up in the fire. They cannot lead to reward. In fact, bad or worthless deeds are linked with suffering “loss” (1 Cor 3:15). What is this loss? It cannot be a loss of salvation since Paul says, “though he himself will be saved” (1 Cor 3:15). Nor can it be a punitive loss coming from judgment for sin. The Christian is under no condemnation for sin since Jesus has atoned for his sins (Rom 8:1). The “loss” could be the realization and awareness of lost opportunities for Christ and a deep remorse for wasting valuable opportunities to bring God glory and to gain greater eternal reward. Still, the Christian’s appearance before Jesus is a joyous event. Paul told the Corinthians to “wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 1:7–8). Yet the Christian should strive to avoid a sense of shame and loss. John warned about this when he said, “And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming” (1 John 2:28).

The judgment seat of Christ does not stop with an evaluation of deeds; rather, it goes deeper to motives. First Corinthians 4:5 says that the Lord “will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.” Thus, the judgment before Jesus is so penetrating that motives behind deeds are evaluated as well. Not only does what we do matter, but so does why we do what we do.

The *bēma* of Jesus also has corporate implications for the church. The resurrected and rewarded church will return victoriously with Jesus at His second coming to earth (Rev 19:14). The church will also be granted the right to share in Jesus’ Davidic throne reign (Rev 3:21) and to rule the nations with Him (Rev 2:26–27). Thus, faithful service in this age affects a Christian’s position in the coming kingdom of Jesus. Not all Christians will receive equal reward and authority; according to Luke 19:11–27, some will be granted more ruling authority than others.

Judgment of Israel

Jesus will return to earth and set up His kingdom (Zech 14:4, 9), yet since only those who are redeemed can enter the kingdom (John 3:3), there must be judgments

to determine who will enter. One of these judgments involves Jews living at the time of Jesus' return. Ezekiel 20:33–38 explicitly explains this event:

As I live, declares the Lord GOD, surely with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with wrath poured out I will be king over you. I will bring you out from the peoples and gather you out of the countries where you are scattered, with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and with wrath poured out. And I will bring you into the wilderness of the peoples, and there I will enter into judgment with you face to face. As I entered into judgment with your fathers in the wilderness of the land of Egypt, so I will enter into judgment with you, declares the Lord GOD. I will make you pass under the rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant. I will purge out the rebels from among you, and those who transgress against me. I will bring them out of the land where they sojourn, but they shall not enter the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the LORD.

This coming judgment of Israel will be a mighty act of God. With “wrath poured out,” God will “be king” over Israel (Ezek 20:33). He will gather Jews from the “countries” where they were scattered (Ezek 20:34). The setting for this judgment scene will be “the wilderness of the peoples,” and it will be an actual face-to-face meeting that parallels God’s meeting with Israel in the wilderness of Egypt (Ezek 20:35–36). Israel will pass under the Lord’s kingly and shepherd-like rod to enter the “bond of the covenant” (Ezek 20:37). This refers not to the Mosaic covenant but to national Israel’s entrance into the blessings of the new covenant. Paul speaks of this in Romans 11:26–27, where the salvation of “all Israel” is linked with the new covenant passages of Isaiah 59:20–21 and Jeremiah 31:31–34. The new covenant was inaugurated with Jesus’ death (Luke 22:20), and some of its spiritual blessings are experienced in this present age, but Israel will come into the covenant as Jesus establishes his kingdom on earth. Yet not all Israelites will enter this kingdom. The Lord says, “I will purge out the rebels from among you” (Ezek 20:38a). Even for Israel, spiritual birth is the prerequisite for entering the kingdom of God. The wicked will not enter the kingdom. Though they have been gathered from the nations for this judgment, “they shall not enter the land of Israel” (Ezek 20:38b).

This judgment of Israel could occur during the coming tribulation period or at a specific judgment setting immediately after Jesus’ return to earth. The judgment of Israel at Jesus’ return may also be in view in the parables of the ten virgins (Matt 25:1–13) and the talents (Matt 25:14–30). In these parables, the coming of Jesus finds people who are both foolish and wise concerning His return. The application of these parables certainly goes beyond Israel to all who await Jesus’ return, but the Jewish context of Matthew 24–25 makes application of these parables to Israel likely, especially since the Sheep-Goat judgment described in Matthew 25:31–46 focuses specifically on Gentile nations.

Judgment on the Nations

The return of Jesus to earth also results in a judgment of living Gentiles. Two passages directly address this: Joel 3:1–16 and Matthew 25:31–46. First, the prophet Joel predicted,

For behold, in those days and at that time, when I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem, I will gather all the nations and bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat. And I will enter into judgment with them there, on behalf of my people and my heritage Israel. (Joel 3:1–2a)

The context of this passage is the day-of-the-Lord judgments of Joel 2, which involve the salvation and blessing of Israel. At this “time” when God restores Israel, He will “gather all the nations” and judge them on behalf of Israel. The Gentile nations will be judged for scattering the Jewish people and dividing up Israel’s land, as well as for other atrocities (Joel 3:2b–3). The place of this judgment is specific—“the Valley of Jehoshaphat.” From there God will “judge all the surrounding nations” (Joel 3:12). In sum, Joel 3 reveals that God will judge the nations that harmed Israel.

Next, Matthew 25:31–46 also describes a general judgment of Gentile nations:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. 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. (Matt 25:31–32)

This judgment of Gentiles is often referred to as *the sheep-goat judgment* since believers are likened to “sheep” and the wicked to “goats.” The purpose of this judgment is to determine who is qualified to enter Jesus’ earthly kingdom and who is not. The righteous sheep enter Jesus’ kingdom while the wicked are excluded from it and slain.

The basis of this judgment is how the Gentile peoples treated others. Those who treated “the least of these” (Matt 25:40, 45) with kindness and mercy were really treating Jesus in that way, even though they were unaware of it. Likewise, mistreatment or neglect of others showed contempt for Jesus. This judgment, which is based on acts of compassion, does not indicate that salvation is based on works but rather makes clear that works accurately reveal character (see Rom 2:5–11). Faith, or the lack of it, is evidenced by works.

While the treatment of the group called “the least of these” has implications for all people, this passage may also have the treatment of the Jewish people in view. Joel 3, which is the background for the judgment of Matthew 25:31–46, declares that the judgment of the nations was on behalf of Israel and reflected how the Gentile nations treated Israel. This may be the case in Matthew 25 as well, especially since persecution of Jews is described in Matthew 24:15–28.

Matthew 25 makes no mention of a resurrection from the dead for those experiencing this judgment. This judgment, therefore, is for Gentiles alive at the time of Jesus’ return. Also, it makes no mention of glorification. The “sheep” enter the earthly kingdom of Jesus in their mortal bodies, while the “goats” are executed and enter eternal fire (Matt 25:41, 46).

Judgment of Satan and Demons

Satan and his demons suffered original judgment when Satan sinned against God in heaven (Rev 12:1–4). They also experienced a Calvary judgment where their power was defeated by Jesus at the cross (Col 2:14–15). Yet three future judgments for Satan and the demons await—tributational, millennial, and eternal judgments.

Revelation 12:7–13 tells of a tributational judgment when Satan and his demons will be thrown from heaven to earth. At this point, Satan’s access to heaven will be forever removed, and he will turn his attention to persecuting Israel on earth. This will happen around the midpoint of Daniel’s seventieth week (Dan 9:27) since this event is linked with the period called “a time, and times, and half a time” (Rev 12:14), which is three and one-half years. From this point onward, Satan will no longer be able to accuse believers of sin in the presence of God (Rev 12:10–11).

Satan is currently active, opposing God’s plans, deceiving the nations, and persecuting the saints of God. But Revelation 20:1–3 chronicles a coming millennial judgment, after Jesus’ return to earth (Rev 19:11–21), when Satan will be seized, bound, and thrown into a pit. This pit is not the lake of fire but a spiritual prison that will completely remove Satan’s access to the earth and his ability to deceive. It is probable that all demons will be incarcerated with Satan during this time, while Jesus and his saints will rule the earth for a thousand years with no interference from Satan and his corrupt fallen angels (Rev 20:4).

The final judgment of Satan and the demons will take place in the eternal judgment after the millennium (Rev 20:7–10). The forces of hell will be released for one final yet doomed rebellion. Satan, demons, and a foolish Christ-rejecting multitude from the nations will attempt to attack the beloved city of Jerusalem, but fire from heaven will instantly consume them in judgment. At that time, Satan and all demons (Matt 25:41; 2 Pet 2:4; Jude 6) will join the Antichrist and the false prophet in the lake of fire (Rev 20:10). This is the final judgment of Satan and his demons, when they will forever be removed from opposing God’s kingdom and God’s people.

The Great White Throne Judgment

All unbelievers are ultimately destined for the Great White Throne judgment. This terrifying event is described in 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. 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. 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. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

This final sentencing of the lost is the most serious, sobering, and tragic passage in the Bible. This is the last courtroom scene in history.

The timing of this Great White Throne judgment takes place after the thousand-year reign of Christ and His saints (Rev 20:4–7). The One present on the throne is none other than God Almighty (Rev 4:2–11), which must certainly refer to Jesus since all judgment has been granted to Him (John 5:22, 26–27).

The purpose of this judgment is to declare who will be sent to the lake of fire (Rev 20:15), which is also referred to as “the second death” (Rev 20:6). The subjects of the Great White Throne judgment are unbelievers, whose bodies are raised from “Death and Hades” for this judgment (Rev 20:13).

The basis of the Great White Throne judgment is works (Rev 20:13), and the evidence for this judgment is contained in books that reveal the character and deeds of every person. The reference to “books were opened” may include records of the deeds of those before the throne. Then “another book” identified as “the book of life” is opened. This book lists those who have been saved by Jesus. The book of life is a testimony against the unsaved, whose names are not in it. These are “thrown into the lake of fire,” which is the final destiny of the lost.

Are the Sheep-Goat Judgment and the Great White Throne Judgment the Same?

Some theologians view the Sheep-Goat judgment of Matthew 25:31–46 and the Great White Throne judgment of Revelation 20:11–15 as the same event. They suggest that both describe a judgment scene and a fiery destiny for the wicked. But a close examination reveals that these two judgments cannot be the same. First, the *timing* of the Sheep-Goat judgment occurs in close proximity to Jesus’ Second Coming (see Matt 25:31–32). Jesus comes in glory with His angels and sits on His glorious throne (i.e., His Davidic throne), and then all the nations are gathered before Him for judgment. So the Sheep-Goat judgment is closely connected to Jesus’ Second Coming. On the other hand, the Great White Throne judgment occurs after the thousand-year reign of Jesus and His saints (Rev 20:4–7). Subsequent to the thousand years (Rev 20:7), the Great White Throne judgment takes place (Rev 20:11–15). This point alone shows that these judgments are distinct. One judgment occurs at the beginning of Jesus’ kingdom reign, while the other occurs after the millennium in the transition to the eternal state. Also, the resurrections, separated by a thousand years (see Rev 20:4–5), strongly suggest that these are two distinct judgments.

In addition to timing, differences exist in the details of these judgments. The *purpose* of the Sheep-Goat judgment is to see who will inherit the kingdom (Matt 25:34) and who will not (Matt 25:41). The purpose of the Great White Throne judgment is to see who will be sent to the lake of fire (Rev 20:15). Their purposes are different, and no hope is offered at the Great White Throne.

Also, the *subjects* of the Sheep-Goat judgment are both believers and nonbelievers—sheep and goats (Matt 25:32). But the subjects of the Great White Throne are only unbelievers. While Revelation 20:11–15 does not exclude believers being present as spectators at this judgment, it does not mention them. The subjects of the Sheep-Goat judgment are those alive at the time of the Second Coming of Jesus, but the Great White Throne judgment involves the resurrection of the lost (Rev 20:13). The sea and Hades give up their dead for this judgment. These differences indicate that the two judgments are each unique and occur at separate times.