

# THE FINAL JUDGMENT

## **Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14**

“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 nations and peoples 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.

## **Matthew 25:31-46**

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’ “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not

look after me.’ “They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’ “He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’ “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

## **MESSAGE:**

The Final Judgment will be the most important event in human history. When the Court of Heaven is opened on the last day and Jesus the Judge divides humanity into two camps—the saved and the lost—the eternal destiny of everyone who has ever lived will be sealed forever. At that moment, the paltry significance of the few years we have spent living and breathing on this planet will become clear to us as we stare into the abyss of eternity.

God gave the Old Testament prophet Daniel a vision of the final judgement: *“As I looked, thrones were set in place and the Ancient of Days took his seat....Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court was seated and the books were opened.”* The “Ancient of Days” is God Himself and the seat He takes is the seat of Judgment. As a judge sits down at the bench in a courtroom and prepares to administer justice to those accused of a crime, so will God proceed to administer justice to everyone who has ever lived—including you and me.

The books represent God’s knowledge of everything every one of us as ever thought or said or done—not only all of our outward actions, but all the thoughts of our hearts and every word which has passed through our lips. Think of that! Every angry word you have spoken to or about another person, every lustful thought you have entertained, every grudge you have nursed against an enemy: God knows them all. *He will judge you on the basis of that record. If that doesn’t terrify you, nothing will.*

But then another figure appears in Daniel’s vision: *“...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.”*

The “son of man” in Daniel’s vision is the messianic king who would come to execute God’s judgment upon the world. From the earliest rabbinical writings

this figure has always been understood to be the Messiah. But for Daniel, the Messiah was a terrifying figure, either God himself or an angel who would judge the sins of Israel and condemn all those who were unrighteous to hell—so terrifying that it left him pale and shaking with fear. For Daniel knew—as do we all—that if we are to be judged by a record of our lives, our condemnation is assured.

With our “New Testament” eyes, however, we know that the Son of Man did not come to execute judgment upon us, but to take our sins upon Himself and pay their penalty by dying on the cross. And the names of all of us who hold that faith are written in another book of which the Bible speaks, which is the Book of Life.

Moses speaks of this Book of Life when he says to God: *“But now, please forgive their sin, but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written.”* David mentions it in *Psalms 69* when he prays against his enemies: *“May they be blotted out of the Book of Life and not be listed with the righteous.”* Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, refers to *“...my fellow workers whose names are in the Book of Life.”* And in the *Book of Revelation*, John writes, *“Another book was opened which is the book of life....If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”*

The names of the righteous are listed in the Book of Life—and the righteous are all those who have placed their faith and hope in Jesus, because for His sake God has declared us righteous. The Book of Life trumps the Books of Deeds and therefore we have nothing to fear. As Jesus says, *“Rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”*

So what’s going on at the final judgment? Let’s look at it as it is described by the Son of Man himself, the One who was given authority, glory and sovereign power—the One who will judge us. What does He say will actually happen?

First, the Judge (Jesus Himself) separates all mankind into two groups: the sheep and the goats. Then he invites those on his right—the sheep who have been blessed by the Father—to receive their inheritance which God prepared for them before the creation of the world. Next He describes how they have fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, provided hospitality to strangers, supplied clothes to the needy, rendered care to the sick and sought fellowship with those in prison. and He tells them that when they

ministered to those in need it was counted by God as if they had been ministering to Christ Himself.

Then he turns to the other group, the goats, and reminds them that they failed to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to welcome strangers and supply clothes to the needy, to render care to the sick and extend the hand of fellowship to those in prison, and ordains that they be cast into the lake of fire.

Now this is an interesting passage, one which has been used to argue for a “works-based” final judgment, as if it was by their deeds of mercy that the sheep earned heaven and, conversely, by their failure to perform such works that the goats deserved to be cast into hell. But this view is not only refuted by the rest of Scripture, which clearly teaches that salvation is by grace alone and not by works: it is refuted by the passage itself.

First of all, notice that the two groups, the sheep and the goats, are first described on the basis of what they are rather than on the basis of what they have done. They have completely different natures. A sheep is a sheep and a goat is a goat and never the twain shall meet!

Now a goat doesn't become a goat by acting like a goat: it behaves like a goat because it is a goat to begin with. The same is true of a sheep. What we do reflects what we are, not the reverse, and this passage makes it clear that we will be separated on the basis of what we are, not on the basis of what we have done.

Second, the judge says to the sheep: *“Come you who are blessed by my Father.”* They are invited to come based upon a blessing they have received from the Father, not based upon what they have done. The Father's blessing has made them what they are, and it is on the basis of what they are that they are invited to come.

Finally, the kingdom into which they are invited is called their “inheritance”—which has been prepared for them since before the creation of the world. Now an inheritance is received by birthright, not earned by deeds. One is either an heir, based upon a relationship of sonship to the Father, or one is not. And this Father has prepared an inheritance for His children—those reborn in His name who are brothers of His Son—long before they stand before His throne. Long before they were even born.

So the good deeds of the sheep listed here were simply the natural expression of what God had made them: children of their Heavenly Father. In the language of the Bible, they were sheep who heard and followed the voice of their shepherd. Or, in another metaphor the Bible uses, they had been changed from bad trees which naturally bore bad fruit, into good trees which naturally bore good fruit. That's why they seem surprised when the king recounts all their acts of love! "When did we do all these things?" they exclaim. They kept no record; they weren't trying to accumulate credits.

They had received a blessing which had changed their fundamental natures, and they were just acting in accord with their new natures. How can we describe these happy people? They heard the word of grace—the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins for Jesus' sake—and they received it with joy and thanksgiving. They allowed themselves to be transformed, recreated by the Holy Spirit working through the Word of God. They accepted responsibility for their sins, they repented and earnestly sought to amend their lives, they clung to God's assurance that their sins had been forgiven, and they strove to see the world and their fellow man through Gospel eyes, the eyes of love.

If you yearn to be one of these happy people, you already are one because only the Holy Spirit can create a longing in the human heart for the things of God. You have made a beginning, and a beginning is all any of us can make in this life. We are all beginners, amateurs, rookies when it comes to living in the Kingdom of God. That's all we'll ever be this side of heaven and thank God it's all we need to be.

In this world we still carry around with us a sinful nature which fights tooth and nail against the work of the Holy Spirit within us. And our sinful nature urges us to believe one of two things: that we can reform ourselves by our own strength, or, alternatively, that we can just leave it all up to God. And Satan is perfectly happy to have you follow either of those paths because the first one leads to despair and the second one leads to spiritual sloth—and a poor witness to Jesus Christ.

The truth, as the Bible teaches us, is that we can either hinder or facilitate the work of the Holy Spirit in us, and that means that we need to set our minds to do those things which will facilitate His work. Some of these things we already do: we pray, we worship, we have devotions at home, we continue in the study of God's Word, we engage in Christian fellowship. All

these are channels of God's grace through which the Holy Spirit releases His sanctifying power into our lives.

But there are other things which we are perhaps less inclined to do, things which also help. We can tell others about the joy and consolation we have in Jesus Christ, and assure them that they can have this joy and consolation as well. We can pray to the Holy Spirit to show us the real depth and extent of our sin and then offer it up to the cross. We can strive to display joy and confidence in the face of disappointment and heartbreak, and by doing so radiate faith and hope. Nothing so impresses unbelievers and draws them to the Kingdom as when they witness a believer drawing strength and joy from his faith during times of trial and tragedy. All of these enable the Holy Spirit to create the mind of Christ in us—and, through us, draw other people to the Kingdom of God.

The sheep at the final judgment are simply all those who have received God's gifts and allowed the Holy Spirit to work in them until the Gospel has become more than just something they believe, but a way of life. God has already begun that work in you and he will bring it to completion on the day of our Lord, Jesus Christ. The only question will be: how much will you let Him do before that day arrives?

God grant us grace for Jesus' sake, Amen.