

The Judgment

by Roger Fellows

Judgment has negative connotations, it is not something that most people like to speak about. If death is an unpopular topic, even more so is judgment. It is not normally a subject for dinner table conversation, even with Christians. However, we should not hesitate to discuss what are biblical subjects, and judgment is most certainly in that category.

We should begin by thinking about God's character. We delight to consider his love, his compassion, his longsuffering, even his power and wisdom: but we must not forget that there are other attributes of God that we need to consider so as to get a rounded and balanced view of his nature. God is holy, he is just, he is angry against sin and sinners, and such attributes are necessary to get a whole view of his being. God is a law-giver and that necessitates actual laws, subjects who are bound by those laws, and also sanctions. If God's laws were kept we would know a happy and peaceful society: but his laws are universally broken, so God's justice needs to come into operation. That is true at every level of society. Take traffic laws: if they were always kept, then driving would be pleasurable and safe, but they are not, and unless sanctions were applied, it would not be safe to drive.

With God's laws the same applies. Many refuse to acknowledge that God has given us his laws, and that we have broken them; but as we shall see, there will come a day when all will indeed be compelled to admit that it is so. When God's laws are broken there must be punishment or his laws are meaningless. In this life it often seems that people get away with breaking God's laws, and they are not punished; but when that great day comes, justice will be fully manifested, and all sin will be punished. There is coming a day of judgment.

The noun 'judgment' and the verb 'to judge', are used in a variety of ways. Judgment is sometimes used in the sense of opinion. We might say: 'It is my judgment that repeated deficit budgets are going to ruin the economy.' Or we might comment about someone: 'He is always passing judgment on people,' meaning that the person is very judgmental. We might also refer to a judgment by a court in terms of the verdict.

In the Scriptures there is similarly a variety of ways in which the words are employed. In the sense of opinion, Jesus comments on the answer of the Pharisee to his question:

Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly." (Lk.7:43)
(All biblical quotes are from the ESV).

It may be used in the sense of examination and punishment at an earthly level. Paul writes:

So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another—if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home—so that when you come together it will not be for judgment. (1 Cor.11:33)

See also 1 Pet.4:17

It can be used of assessment in an official sense. Speaking to judges, Moses said:

You shall not be partial in judgment. (Dt.1:17)

It can be used in the sense of condemnation at a human level:

Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, for you, the judge, practice the very same things.

(Rom.2:1)

Paul is referring to Jews who judged Gentiles.

Then it is used to refer to the final judgment when everyone will stand before God in the last day. Jesus, referring to those who would reject the gospel, said:

It will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town.

(Mt. 10:15)

It is this last sense that will be the object of our studies.

We might note first and briefly that:

I. There is a judgment

Of course many will scoff at this and declare that death ends everything. They boast that they will be six feet under, and nothing more matters. However, as we shall see, the Bible tells a very different story. The writer to the Hebrews assures us that:

. . . it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.

(Heb.9:27)

Not only does Scripture tell us this fact, but our consciences also testify to the same thing. God has put eternity in our hearts (Eccles.3:11), and most people, whatever their religious beliefs accept that there will be an afterlife. God has often used the preaching of judgment to bring fear and salvation to people. William Burns, the great Scottish preacher was declaring the gospel in the open air when he was interrupted by a man who was under the influence of alcohol. Burns paused, fixed his eyes on the man and declared:

*You are tall and strong; but you are not too tall for a coffin, nor too strong for the worms!
You are tall and strong; but not too tall for the grave, nor too strong for death! You are tall and strong; but you will soon have to stand forth, one of the crowd, before the great white throne; and how will you face the Judge of the whole earth! Tall and strong as you are, you cannot be hid from God; the rocks and mountains will not cover you; his all-seeing eye is on you now!¹*

The man was silenced and sobered in an instant. From that point he gave careful attention to every word preached. Yes, there is a judgment.

II. There is a day of judgment

Note that Jesus spoke of ‘the **Day** of judgment.’ Perhaps we need to begin by considering the ‘day.’ We might ask for one thing, how many days are there? I say that because there are a variety of

¹ Found in the biography of William Burns by his brother Islay Burns

answers to that question. Dispensationalists teach that there are seven judgments. I list them out of interest:

1. The judgment of believers' sins at the cross
2. The believer's self-judgment
3. The judgment of believers' works—the bema
4. The judgment of the nations (Mt.25:31-46)
5. The judgment of Israel
6. The judgment of angels
7. The judgment of the wicked—the great white throne

No one will argue with the first two, but it seems they are included to bring the number up to seven, considered by many to be the perfect number. It still leaves several 'days' when different groups will be judged. More commonly, people will speak of two main judgments: the judgment of believers for the purpose of assigning rewards (the bema), and the judgment of unbelievers at the great white throne. That view certainly deserves some consideration. Let's consider the different terms used in the New Testament for the day of judgment: actually there are 15 different ones:

i. The day

Paul speaks of a judgment that certainly includes believers, where their labours for the Lord will be evaluated:

... 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. (1 Cor.3:13)

ii. That day

Jesus speaks of that occasion as one that will include unbelievers:

On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.' (Mt.7:22)

Paul uses the same expression to speak of the day when he will appear before the Lord:

I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me. (2 Tim.1:12)

iii. The great day

Jude uses this to refer to the judgment of angels:

... the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day. (Jude 6)

iv. The last day

Jesus uses this term to refer to the resurrection of believers:

For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. (Jn.6:40)

He also employs the same expression to describe the judgment of those who have rejected the gospel:

The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day. (Jn.12:48)

v. The day of judgment

Jesus uses this to speak of the judgment of unbelievers:

But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. (Mt.11:22)

John uses the same words to refer to the judgment of believers:

By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, (1 Jn.4:17)

vi. The day of wrath

Not surprisingly, Paul uses this for the day when unbelievers will face God's judgment:

. . . because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. (Rom.2:5)

vii. The great day of their wrath (KJV has his wrath)

John clearly refers to the judgment of unbelievers by 'him who is seated on the throne' and 'the Lamb':

. . . the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand? (Rev.6:17)

viii. The day of redemption

Paul speaks of the last day for believers:

. . . do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. (Eph.4:30)

ix. The day of the Lord

In 1 Thes.5:2 Paul uses this to refer to the judgment of unbelievers, but the context includes the day when Christ will return for believers. It might be as well to quote the passage from chapter 4:16:

¹⁶*For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.*

¹⁷*Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.* ¹⁸*Therefore encourage one another with these words.*

¹Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, ²you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³While people are saying, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

Paul is continuing the subject matter of chapter 4. The 'times and seasons' of ch.5:1 surely refer to what he has been speaking about in the previous verses, bearing in mind that the chapter divisions are arbitrary. It shows then that the term refers to the judgment of both believers and unbelievers.

In 2 Thes.2:2 he speaks of false rumours being spread about this day, but he points out that before that day comes it will be preceded by a falling away:

. . . not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.

Peter uses the term to refer to the destruction of the world:

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. (2 Pet.3:10)

Paul uses this expression to refer to the final day when a fallen believer will be saved:

. . . you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord. (1 Cor.5:5)

Peter, preaching on the day of Pentecost speaks of this as the day of general judgment. He refers to it as 'the great and magnificent day:'

. . . the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day. (Acts 2:20)

x. The day of the Lord Jesus

Paul uses the expression as a day for believers. Clearly it is the last day:

For we are not writing to you anything other than what you read and understand and I hope you will fully understand—just as you did partially understand us—that on the day of our Lord Jesus you will boast of us as we will boast of you. (2 Cor.1:13,14)

xi. The day of the Lord Jesus Christ

Believers will be blameless in that day:

. . . our Lord Jesus Christ . . . will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Cor.1:8)

xii. The day of Christ

Again, this looks ahead to the day when believers will be perfect:

... so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, (Phil.1:10)

xiii. The day of Jesus Christ

This refers to the completion of God's work in believers:

... he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. (Phil.1:6)

xiv. His day, referring to the Son of Man

A day and a coming that is seen by all:

For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day. (Lk.17:24)

Note also that day is the day of judgment:

... on the day when Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all— so will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed. (v.29,30)

xv. The day of God

Peter refers to the final destruction of the world and how the anticipation of it should make believers holy:

Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! (2 Pet.3:11,12)

It is worth noting that this is the same day as is referred to earlier by Peter as the day of the Lord:

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. (v.10)

It seems hard to avoid the conclusion that all these expressions refer to a single event, an occasion when the following will take place:

- The return of Christ
- The general resurrection
- The judgment of the ungodly
- The judgment of believers
- The judgment of angels
- The destruction of this present world

We can also include the creation of a new heaven and a new earth which Peter speaks about in 2 Pet.3:13.

It is true that John 5:29 may superficially appear to speak of two resurrections. Certainly there will be two groups—the righteous and the wicked, but we are not to assume that the resurrections are

separated by a period of time as Dispensationalists would have us believe. In verse 28, Jesus speaks of the 'hour' when these two resurrections will take place. Paul, when testifying before Felix also speaks of this:

I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets, having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust. So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man. (Acts 24:15,16)

Nowhere in the New Testament do we find the writers looking ahead to more than one day. They anticipated with great joy the return of their Saviour, although there were several implications of that day depending on the context. If they were giving a word of encouragement to Christians who were undergoing persecution, they would refer not only to the future blessings following Christ's return, but also to the judgment of their enemies:

God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints. (2 Thes.1:6-10)

If they were writing to those struggling with sin, they would refer to the Lord's coming but also to the likeness to Christ that would follow that:

Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. (1 Jn.3:2,3)

When Paul was dealing with problems among believers, he reminded them of the coming judgment before which they would all stand and give account of themselves:

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; for it is written, 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.' So then each of us will give an account of himself to God. (Rom.14:10-12)

III. What happens on the day of judgment?

We have observed that several things occur on that day, from the return of Christ to the creation of a new heavens and a new earth. The Dispensational position is that there will in fact be several 'returns' of Christ: a secret one to take believers out of the world before the great tribulation; another at the end of the tribulation to usher in the millennium; and, some hold that there will be a falling away at the end of the millennium and then another return of the Lord to bring in the eternal age. The New Testament never speaks of such a multiplicity of 'comings.' The apostles looked forward to the return of Christ, when all things would be brought to completion and conclusion.

What we do need to note though, is that several things occur at that time and it is not surprising that some find difficulty in this. Apart from the destruction of the old world and the

creation of a new heaven and earth, there are several categories of judgment to fit in, particularly the judgment of believers and unbelievers. Whilst there are of course some fundamental differences between the two groups, Scripture indicates, as we have seen, that there will be one general judgment where all will stand before God.

Let's once again support this from Scripture. Note again Rom.14:10-12, quoted above:

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; for it is written, 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.' So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.

Clearly the apostle is speaking of the judgment of believers, however he is quoting from Isa.45:23 which includes the judgment of unbelievers. It is worth quoting a slightly longer passage to give the context:

Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn; from my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return: To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance. Only in the Lord, it shall be said of me, are righteousness and strength; to him shall come and be ashamed all who were incensed against him. In the Lord all the offspring of Israel shall be justified and shall glory. (v.22-25)

A careful reading of the passage will show that those who will stand at that judgment will be 'those who were incensed against him' as well as 'the offspring of Israel' who 'shall be justified and shall glory' (v.24,25).

Another passage that shows both the righteous and the wicked at the judgment is Mt.25:31-46. I won't quote the whole passage now, but arrayed before the Judge, the Lord Jesus Christ, will be sheep and goats. The result of the judgment is that the righteous (the sheep) will inherit the kingdom (v.34), while the ungodly (the goats) will go away into eternal punishment (v.46). To make this a separate judgment of the nations to determine the blessings that will be received during the millennium, totally ignores the words of verse 46 which speak of the eternal effects of this judgment.

IV. Who is the Judge?

It is the Lord Jesus Christ. We could say in general terms that God is the Judge of the whole earth (Gen.18:25), but it is very clear even in the Old Testament that the one to whom all judgment is committed is Jesus. Note in Psalm 2, that the rage of the nations is directed against the Lord and his Anointed (v.2). Acts 4:24-28 makes it very clear that these verses refer to the Lord Jesus Christ. Later in Psalm 2 it is the Son who is set as King on God's holy hill (v.6,7). He is the one who will break them (the nations) with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel (v.9).

In the New Testament it becomes even clearer. Jesus said:

For the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, (Jn.5:22)

Note also in verse 26, 27:

For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man.

The term Son of Man, is used in certain places simply to express humanity (e.g. Ps.8:4), but in Daniel 7 it is used of the Messiah:

I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. (v.13,14)

In the New Testament the term does refer to Jesus' humanity, but goes beyond that to his role as the messianic Prophet, Priest and King. It is surely in that role, especially as King that he is appointed as Judge.

Another passage that makes it plain that Jesus is the judge is Mt.25:31-46. We will look at that later in detail. See also Mt.7:21-23.

V. What is the standard at the judgment?

It is a judgment according to works. Note Rev.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.

People will be judged according to 'what they had done.' Those things are recorded in books that will be opened on that day. Some will say that it would take many years to read out the deeds of everyone, but of course with God there is no limitation of time. We might also note that God knows all things and does not need to read books (or hear them read) to know what people have done. The opening of the books is to show to all in heaven and earth that God's judgment is just. The passage in Revelation speaks of deeds, but other Scriptures speak of words:

I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned. (Mt.12:36,37)

Rom.2:16 goes even further. Paul speaks of the day when:

... according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

So deeds, words and even thoughts will be judged in that day. The standard of course will be God's holy law. Many have the notion of a judgment when our works will be placed in judicial

scales, and if our good deeds outweigh our bad deeds, we will be OK. Nothing could be farther from the truth. God's standard is perfection, and therefore one sin is enough to put us into hell forever. The apostle Paul makes this very clear:

For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.' (Gal.3:10)

To avoid the curse of the law, it is necessary to continue keeping all things written in the Book of the Law. In other words, we must keep all God's commandments all of the time, or find ourselves under his curse. One failure would be enough to bring that curse upon us. Of course, this is referring to unbelievers, or any who look to the law for their justification. It certainly makes that day a day of terror for those not found in Christ.

But what about believers, where do they fit in? It is striking that every reference to the judgment speaks of a judgment according to works, and that would include references that include or focus on believers. Here is where some find difficulty. How can believers be judged by works? As evangelicals we hold tenaciously to salvation by grace not works. That is true, but nevertheless we still maintain that the judgment is by works. Of course it is not a matter of testing our works to see whether we are worthy of a place in heaven. Rather it is examining our lives to demonstrate that God's salvation really does change those who experience it.

Let's examine three of these passages that describe the judgment. First let's look again at Mt.25:31-46. I will this time quote it in full:

³¹When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. ³²Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. ³⁴Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? ³⁸And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' ⁴⁰And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'

⁴¹Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴²For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' ⁴⁴Then they also will answer, 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?' ⁴⁵Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' ⁴⁶And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'

Note **first**, that the Judge is the Lord Jesus Christ, described as the Son of Man. The event takes place when he comes in his glory (v.31).

Second the nations, that is, the people of all nations, are viewed as sheep and goats who will be placed in separate categories at that time (v.32).

Third, the separation has already taken place when the Lord addresses them. The judgment is not to determine who are sheep and who are goats—that is already decided. The sheep are on his right, the place of favour, the goats are on the left, the place of disfavour (v.33).

Fourth, the sheep are those blessed by the Father, and are to inherit the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world (v.34), and the reason given is that they ministered to Christ himself by showing kindness to his brothers—other believers (v.40).

Fifth, the goats are those who are cursed and are to be consigned to eternal fire (v.41). The reason is the reverse of the sheep—they failed to minister to Christ by neglecting his brothers.

So, I repeat, the judgment is not to determine who are sheep and who are goats and therefore fit or unfit for heaven—it is to demonstrate that the sheep showed they were sheep by their behaviour, in particular their behaviour towards other believers. Conversely the goats demonstrated that they were goats by their behaviour.

Let's look once more at Rev.20:11-15:

¹¹Then 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. ¹²And 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. ¹³And 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. ¹⁴Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. ¹⁵And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Note the following:

First, this is the final judgment, at a time when earth and sky fled away.

Second, all people are there—the dead, great and small (v.12): those given up by the sea, as well as by Death and Hades (v.13).

Third, two books are opened: the book of life (v.12), and a book (books) in which their deeds were recorded.

Fourth, they are judged by their deeds (v.13).

Fifth, there is a correspondence between what the book of deeds has recorded, and their place in the book of life. Those not written in the book of life are thrown into the lake of fire. By implication those whose names are written in the book of life were not cast into the lake of fire.

It is noteworthy that at the judgment the Lord does not simply respond to whether the names of people are written in the book of life or not. Their deeds must accord with their profession.

The third passage we will examine is Jn.5:25-29. We'll quote it again:

²⁵Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. ²⁶For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. ²⁷And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. ²⁸Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice ²⁹and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.

Verse 25 is almost certainly to be applied to a present experience when people pass from spiritual death to spiritual life in conversion (see v.24). J.C. Ryle² and Don Carson³ both favour this interpretation. However, when we come to v.28, our Lord is referring to the final judgment following the physical resurrection. Two key points in this passage:

First, although Jesus refers to two resurrections, they are to be separated not in time but in nature. They take place in the ‘hour’ that ‘is coming.’ Both the righteous and the wicked will rise physically in that hour.

Second, it is described as a judgment according to works. The resurrection of life is for those who have ‘done good.’ And the resurrection of judgment is for those who have ‘done evil.’

So the pattern is consistent. Salvation is by grace alone, through faith, but the judgment is by works, not that the works are evaluated to see whether those judged have earned a place in heaven; they are evaluated to demonstrate that when God saves people, he not only saves them from the guilt of sin, but from its power. Most assuredly, our works will never be all that they should be, but we must show, and God will show, that his people are not mastered by sin. Sin will not have dominion over us (Rom.6:14).

Perhaps it would be appropriate at this point to ask if all the sins of believers will be rehearsed at the judgment? That is a difficult question to answer. Certainly our lives will not be evaluated as to our fitness for heaven—that is assured through the atoning work of Christ. They will be evaluated to determine their rewards, but whether this requires every deed, both good and bad to be rehearsed, is questionable. Perhaps the recounting of our sins will remind us of what we have been saved from, and also when we see the wounds that our Saviour still bears (Jn.20:25, 27, Rev.5:6), we shall be reminded of the cost of our salvation from those sins.

One other digression may be inserted at this point. Those who separate the judgment of believers and unbelievers, make the former simply a time when rewards are given to believers according to their faithfulness. The danger of this is that the basis of judgment is only a matter of faith. If we believe, then works are not all-important. We should be holy, say these people, but salvation doesn’t depend on that holiness. I once heard a preacher say that one can trust in Christ for salvation today, and tomorrow can backslide and live the rest of his or her life in sin, and still be saved. It seems the man was not aware of such passages as Heb.12:14 that tell us that without holiness, no one will see the Lord.

The above quotation may be a shocking one, but essentially the same thing is taught by many today, including some well-known evangelicals. They say that to insist on holiness is to add law to grace and works to faith. In 1988 John MacArthur published his book *‘The Gospel According to Jesus.’* He dealt with the whole issue we have touched on, and showed clearly that Jesus insisted that the gospel not only brings forgiveness but it changes lives radically. A mere profession is not enough, and those who don’t live holy lives will not simply be rebuked at the judgment—they will be cast out. Note the following:

Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’ (Mt.7:21-23)

² *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*

³ *The Gospel According to John* Eerdmans p.256

Faith, zeal, gifts and even success in the ministry, will not be enough to gain entrance to heaven as long as people practise lawlessness. The purpose of God's electing grace unto salvation is holiness or conformity to Jesus:

. . . he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. (Eph.1:4)

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. (Rom.8:29)

To put it another way, God purposes that we should be like himself. Any salvation that doesn't produce this is 'another gospel.' Of course, we know that the likeness will always fall short of the exhortation to be 'perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Mt.5:48). Nevertheless we strive after that perfection and Christ-likeness, and if the Spirit of God lives within us, there will be at least a good measure of that likeness.

Returning then to our main theme of judgment, we shall be judged by our works or deeds, which will show that we have indeed been saved by God's grace and that he is carrying on that sanctifying work in us. There will come a day when that work will be finished, God will bring to completion that which he has begun. That will happen in the day of Jesus Christ (Phil.1:6).

We can regard the anticipation of the day of judgment as a means of grace to keep us moving forward. There are also warnings to help us to persevere. Some are troubled by verses with 'ifs' in them, but we need to consider them not as if our perseverance was in doubt, but as challenges to keep us from becoming complacent. Note the following:

And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed . . . (Col.1:21-23)

Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope. (Heb.3:6)

For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. (Heb.3:14)

Yes, perseverance is not optional, nor doubtful for true believers.

VI. The purpose of the judgment

It is primarily to vindicate God—to demonstrate his justice. It will also show the true character of all people. Those who have rejected the gospel and lived for themselves will be manifested on that day. They will be cast into hell—and subjected to everlasting punishment. We know that there are those, for example, Seventh Day Adventists, who object to this. We have seen ads in the newspapers asking how a loving God could punish people in hell for eternity, and so they advocate annihilation instead of everlasting punishment for the wicked. Sadly, even some evangelicals have embraced this view. If we understand something of the holiness of God, we will see the enormity of sin, and the awfulness of going against his commands. If we grasp these things, we shall not see any injustice in everlasting punishment.

There is not time to develop the doctrine of everlasting punishment: we simply give a number of references that make the truth plain:

... these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. (Mt.25:46)

... when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed. (2 Thes.1:7-10)

And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, 'If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name.' (Rev.14:9-11)

On the other hand, God's people will be received into their glorious inheritance. Having argued for a judgment according to works, we have to acknowledge that we could never measure up to the perfect, absolute standards of God. Our only hope of heaven is the imputed righteousness of Christ, because God not only seeks but also insists on perfect holiness. We see a tension here: while we are to demonstrate that salvation produces holiness, our holiness can never satisfy God's perfect standards, so our confidence is never in our holiness, but in the work of Christ. This tension or balance is well described in Eph.2:8-10:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

There is another purpose in the judgment and that is the giving of rewards to God's people. We are familiar with the parable of the talents. It won't hurt to quote it in full:

For it (the kingdom of heaven v.1) will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money. Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me five talents; here, I have made five talents more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.' And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me two talents; here, I have made two talents more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the

joy of your master.’ He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours.’ But his master answered him, ‘You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Mt.25:14-30)

The parable of the minas is similar (Lk.19:12-27). These parables are generally accepted, and correctly, I believe, as teaching that believers will be rewarded according to their faithfulness in what was committed to them. Both parables also include unbelievers who have also had gifts and opportunities committed to them, but have neglected them. We might note some other scriptures that speak of rewards:

He said also to the man who had invited him, “When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.” (Lk.14:12-14)

Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. (Col.3:23,24)

¹⁰*According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. ¹¹For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹²Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— ¹³each 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. ¹⁴If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. (1 Cor.3:10-15)*

The latter passage needs some amplification. It is used by some to justify the view that we can be saved without holiness. What they say is that we are building our lives on the foundation of salvation by faith. If we build good things, gold, silver and precious stones, we will receive rewards, but if we build wood, hay and straw, in other words, useless, ungodly lives, that won't pass the standard of God's judgment (pictured as fire), we will not be rewarded, but we will still enter heaven, but only as through fire.

This would be totally opposed to verses we have quoted earlier, such as Heb.12:14 and Mt.7:21-23, that show the necessity of holiness. What the apostle is speaking about, is not holiness of life, or its absence, but the labours of those who are serving the Lord. Their lives must and will demonstrate obedience to the Lord, but it may be that some will have little fruit to show for their ministry.

These passages do show that believers will be rewarded at the judgment for the level of holiness and faithfulness they have attained. There are degrees of reward. It should be our supreme desire to gain the greatest reward, not to lose out. Note the words of the apostle John:

Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward. (2 Jn.8)

Rather we should have the attitude described by the apostle Paul:

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified. (1 Cor.9:24-27)

Having noted that in the great day we shall receive rewards, we must always bear in mind two things: **first** that our entrance into heaven will not depend on our holiness or faithfulness but on the finished work of Christ. We stress again that we could never measure up to God's perfect standard of ourselves. Only by the imputed righteousness of Christ can we ever be acceptable to God, but at the same time we will be rewarded according to the lives we have lived on earth.

The **second** thing is that while some will doubtless receive great rewards, those who receive the smallest rewards will still enjoy unspeakable glory. We shall all receive perfect resurrection bodies: we shall all see Jesus face to face: we shall all be like our precious Saviour: we shall all enjoy an eternity in glory.

We might mention at this point, that just as there will be degrees of reward, so there will be degrees of punishment. There is not time to enlarge upon this, I just quote one verse:

And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you. (Mt.11:23,24)

See also Mt.10:15, Lk.12:47,48, Heb.10:29.

As to the nature of the rewards, that is a little more difficult—those things don't seem to be clearly revealed. Some think that we shall receive crowns according to our faithfulness, but it doesn't seem very likely that some will go around in glory with numerous crowns piled on their heads! Nor is heaven to be conceived of as a period of endless rest or a never-ending choir practice, though of course there will be in one sense, endless worship. It seems probable that we shall be rewarded with different levels of responsibility, as the parable of the minas would indicate (Lk.19:12-27). We will serve the Lord in heaven and that will likely involve some measure of organization and responsibility. A well-organized society in this world involves order and varied responsibility: why should that not also be true in glory?

However, at the end of the day, we can't be sure of the nature of our rewards, but we know it will reflect on our behaviour in this life. This should motivate us to greater holiness and faithfulness to the Lord. While as believers, we don't fear the wrath of God at the judgment, nevertheless, it will be a solemn day, one we should never view lightly. In that light the apostle Paul said to Felix:

I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets, having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust. So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man. (Acts 24:15,16)

The judgment of angels

This will be another element of the judgment:

. . . the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day. (Jude 6)

See also 2 Pet.2:4.

It seems that early in creation history, some of the angels rebelled against God, probably led by Satan. Scriptures that shed some light on this are: Lk.10:18, 2 Pet.2:4, Jude:6, Rev.12:7-10. We presume that these are the demons, who while they are allowed some freedom of activity at this time, are nevertheless reserved for judgment. There was no salvation for the fallen angels, and in the last day they will be judged.

What is interesting is that believers are to be involved in that judgment:

Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life! (1 Cor.6:3)

In fact, we shall be involved in the judgment of the world:

. . . do you not know that the saints will judge the world? (1 Cor.6:2)

There are some things here that are hard to grasp. We are to be judged ourselves, yet we are to be involved in the judgment of the world and of angels. This will surely be because of our union with Christ. We are joined to him in his death, burial, resurrection, ascension, session and also involved with him in the judgment. That is a subject we don't have time to explore now.

Let me try to summarize:

- There is coming a day of judgment that will occur when the Lord Jesus Christ returns.
- The present order of things will cease—the heavens and the earth will be consumed with fire.
- There will be the final judgment when both the saved and the lost will stand before the Lord.
- All will be judged by works.
- Believers' works will be judged to demonstrate that their salvation produced holiness of life, and also to determine their eternal rewards.
- Unbelievers will be judged to show their disobedience to God's commandments.
- Believers will be received into heaven.
- The wicked will be cast into hell.
- Angels will also be judged.
- Believers will be involved in the judgment both of the world and of angels.

- There will be the creation of a new heavens and a new earth.
- The eternal age will be ushered in.

VII. Living in the light of the judgment

As Christians, the judgment and surrounding events are presented so frequently, especially in the New Testament, that it should not be neglected. We should remind ourselves regularly that one day we shall stand before the judgment seat of Christ. We do not need to live in terror of that day, but we should have a healthy respect for it. The apostle Paul writes:

Knowing the fear (KJV terror) of the Lord, we persuade others. (2 Cor.5:11)

This is often taken to mean that Paul preached the fear of the Lord to sinners. Doubtless that was true, but the context is teaching that *'we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ'* (v.10), so the apostle is speaking about the fear of the Lord for himself. In other words he preached to others with the thought before him that one day he would appear before that judgment seat to give an account of his ministry.

The same thought is found in Hebrews 13:17:

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

Chrysostom said: 'The fear of this threat continually agitates my soul.'⁴ Every pastor needs to pursue his calling with the awareness that he will one day be judged, not only for his own life, but in some degree for the souls of those under his care. That is true for ministers regarding their service for the Lord, but it is also true that every believer will give an account of his life in the last day. This of course must be balanced with the assurance that we shall be with the Lord forever because of the atoning work of Christ on our behalf, but that fear should never be lost. It was to believers that the author of Hebrews wrote: 'Our God is a consuming fire' (Heb.12:29).

We should, like the apostle, live in the light of the resurrection and judgment and 'take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man' (Acts 24:16). We should live every day as if it might be our last, as indeed it might.

Another way in which we need to live in the light of the judgment, is in our attitude towards unbelievers. It is very easy to view them simply as those who have different interests. We like to go to church on Sunday: they prefer to play golf or watch TV. But we need to see them in the light of the judgment and eternity. These are people who, if they continue in their present course, will stand before God in that day and hear those dreadful words: 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire.' I know we have to be realistic: we are surrounded with multitudes in the same condition, and it is not feasible to warn everyone, but there are enough people close to us who need that warning, and we so often neglect to do that.

As we conclude, we should note that the important thing is not so much how many 'days' there may be, but to be aware that we are moving steadily towards that day when life on this earth will terminate and we shall stand before the Lord and give an account. May the Lord grant that we shall all be ready for that day.

⁴ *Homilies on Hebrews* Quoted in a 9Marks article by Eric Beech