



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)
Lesson 15.6 – The Doctrine of the Last Things (Eschatology)

The Day of Judgment

Jesus and His apostles clearly taught that the last day would be a day of final judgment. **“When the Son of Man comes in 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. ... And these (the goats) will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous (the sheep) into eternal life”** (Matthew 25:31-33, 46).

Sometimes God has chosen to bring about preliminary physical judgments on certain individuals or nations. The great flood in Noah's time was such a judgment. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was such a judgment. Many of the defeats in war suffered by the children of Israel during the times of the judges and the kings were acts of judgment on the part of God against His rebellious, disobedient people. God also carried out judgments on such ungodly heathen cities as Tyre and Sidon, Nineveh, and Babylon. But such judgments were only preliminary. The main event is still to come: **“the day of judgment”**.

Jesus warned the cities who rejected His teaching: **“Assuredly, I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment that for that city!”** (Matthew 10:15). Capernaum, Chorazin, and Bethsaida were cities where Jesus had done many of His mighty miracles. Jesus said to them: **“I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you”** (Matthew 11:22).

“The day of judgment” and **“the last day”** are the very same day. Jesus taught: **“He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him – the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day”** (John 12:48). Jesus also called the day of judgment **“the last day”** in John 6:39-40. The apostle Paul told the Athenians: **“He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained”** (Acts 17:31). Paul called that day **“the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God”** (Romans 2:5). On that day God will **“judge the world”** (Romans 3:6). When **“the Lord comes”**, He **“will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts”** (1 Corinthians 4:5). No one will be missing on that day, for **“we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ”** (2 Corinthians 5:10).

Sometimes the day of judgment is simply called **“that day”** as when Jesus said: **“Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’”** (Matthew 7:22-23). Jesus said: **“Of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only”** (Matthew 24:36). So also the apostle Paul referred to Judgment Day as **“that day”** (2 Thessalonians 1:10, 2 Timothy 1:12; 4:8).

Paul called Judgment Day **“the day of our Lord Jesus Christ”** (1 Corinthians 1:8), **“the day of the Lord Jesus”** (1 Corinthians 5:5), and **“the day of the Lord”** (1 Thessalonians 5:2). The apostle Peter called that day **“the day of judgment”** (2 Peter 2:9) and **“the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men”** (2 Peter 3:7) as well as **“the day of the Lord”** (2 Peter 3:10) and **“the day of God”** (2 Peter 3:12). Jude, the brother of James and Jesus, spoke of **“the judgment of the great day”** (Jude 6).

Who will be the judge on the day of judgment? Abraham knew the answer to this question, for he called the LORD God “**the Judge of all the earth**” (Genesis 18:25). David had the same answer, for he said: “**The LORD shall endure forever; He has prepared His throne for judgment. He shall judge the world in righteousness**” (Psalm 9:7-8).

Jesus explained in greater detail how this judgment would proceed. He said: “**As the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself, and has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man**” (John 5:26-27). The LORD God will judge the world in the person of the Son of God and Son of Man, Jesus Christ. Jesus taught His disciples: “**The Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works**” (Matthew 16:27). Again He said: “**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**” (Matthew 25:31-32).

For this reason, the apostle Peter told Cornelius and his household: “**He (Jesus) commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead**” (Acts 10:42). Likewise, the apostle Paul told the Athenians: “**He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead**” (Acts 17:31). Paul taught the Romans: “**God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ**” (Romans 2:16). “**We shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ**” (Romans 14:10). “**We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ**” (2 Corinthians 5:10). “**The Lord Jesus Christ ... will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom**” (2 Timothy 4:1; also 1 Peter 4:5). “**So then each of us shall give account of himself to God**” (Romans 14:12).

Amazingly Jesus will be joined as Judge on that last day by His apostles and by all who believe in Him. In answer to a question from Peter, Jesus said: “**Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel**” (Matthew 19:28). On the very night of His arrest Jesus assured His apostles: “**You are those who have continued with Me in My trials. And I bestow upon you a kingdom, just as My Father bestowed one upon Me, that you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel**” (Luke 22:28-30). Jesus said this, even though He knew that that very night they would all forsake Him and run away when He was arrested.

In fact, all of Jesus’ believers will join Him as Judge on that day. The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “**Do you not know that the saints (the believers in Christ) will judge the world? And if the world will be judged by you, are you unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, things that pertain to this life?**” (1 Corinthians 6:2-3). Paul said this to them because they were taking internal arguments to heathen courts instead of handling these disputes among themselves. Their judging of angels refers to their sitting with Jesus as Judge over Satan and all his hosts.

How is it possible for the apostles and believers in Jesus to serve as judges with Christ when they themselves are subject to God’s judgment? The answer is given in Isaiah 53, where we read: “**Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise Him** (the suffering Servant of God, Jesus Christ); **He has put Him to grief**” (Isaiah 53:10). In a sense God carried out the judgment of the world on Good Friday, for it was then and there that He pronounced judgment on His Son, who was at that moment bearing the sin of the world as the Lamb of God responsible and guilty of all human sin. God judged man’s sin when He judged Jesus guilty of all sin and punished Him for it. “**The LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all**” (Isaiah 53:6).

For that very reason Jesus will judge the world on the Last Day based on acceptance or non-acceptance of Him and His sacrifice on the cross. All human sin was punished in full when God punished Jesus on

the cross, when God made Him to be sin for us and therefore cursed and condemned Him and forsook Him. Therefore, those willing to confess their sins and cling to Jesus' sacrifice on their behalf will escape condemnation. Jesus and His apostles made this point as clear as it could possibly be made over and over again. Shortly before His ascension to heaven Jesus told His disciples: "**Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned**" (Mark 16:15-16). Notice that Jesus is not saying that anyone who has any kind of faith at all will be saved. He is saying that those who believe the Gospel will be saved. The Gospel is the Good News that Jesus is God's Son who was sent into the world to live, suffer, die, and rise again for our salvation.

Jesus very clearly taught this Good News to the Pharisee Nicodemus when he said to him: "**As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God**" (John 3:14-18). Notice here again that Jesus is not talking about just any kind of faith or believing, but about believing in Him. He is the only Savior.

This was also the testimony of John the Baptist (baptizer), whom God sent into the world to prepare for the Christ: "**He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him**" (John 3:36). We do not come into this world with this kind of faith. Even though Jesus died and rose again many years ago and was judged and condemned for human sin at that time, the wrath and anger of God still hangs over the heads of earth's residents until they are brought to trust in Jesus and what He has done. Listen to Jesus' explanation of how this works: "**Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life**" (John 5:24). This passing from death to life takes place when the Holy Spirit uses the Word of God to bring a person out of the darkness of unbelief into the light of faith (trust and reliance) on Jesus Christ as Savior. Such a person will not be condemned on the final day of judgment.

Jesus said: "**I have come as a light into the world, that whoever believes in Me should not abide in darkness. And if anyone hears My words and does not believe, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him – the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day**" (John 12:46-48). Notice that believing in Jesus includes believing in His words, trusting in His teaching.

All of Jesus' apostles taught the Gospel that He told them to teach, especially the apostle Paul, whom Jesus chose especially to be His apostle to the Gentiles, the non-Jews. Over and over again in his letter to the Romans the apostle Paul emphasized faith in Jesus and His redemption as the only way sinners can receive the redemption and justification Jesus won for the whole world. The righteousness of God is received "**through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe**" (Romans 3:22). All are "**justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith**" (Romans 3:24-25). All have been declared righteous because of what Christ did, but the way for the individual sinner to receive this justification is "**through faith**". "**Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law**" (Romans 3:28). The idea of working to earn our salvation is ruled out completely, for Paul writes: "**To him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness**" (Romans 4:5). The sinner's faith is not his work by which he earns salvation. His faith is trust in Another, that is, in Jesus and the Gospel that God forgives sins and gives eternal life because of what Jesus did.

What wonderful comfort there is in these words! “**Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ**” (Romans 5:1Error! Bookmark not defined.). “**There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus**” (Romans 8:1). “**It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?**” (Romans 8:33-35).

It is true that God’s law condemns us all, both believers and unbelievers. We need God’s law to remind us at all times that we are sinners who deserve punishment and that there is no way that we can earn or merit eternal life. Listen, for example, to how these words of Jesus condemn us all: “**I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned**” (Matthew 12:36-37). If we are inclined to think that a misuse of the tongue is a harmless little blunder, these words will wake us up and remind us that we do indeed sin every day in thought, word, and deed, and that we need to cling to Jesus for forgiveness. Those who are lifelong Christians who have centered their lives on hearing God’s Word in church and reading the Bible at home need Paul’s reminder: “**Not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified**” (Romans 2:13). Does not God’s law curse apply to us all? “**Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them**” (Galatians 3:10).

Thus, the warnings of God’s law are directed to all of us, even to Christians on account of our sinful flesh. But “**Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes**” (Romans 10:4). “**If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the Scripture says, ‘Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame’**” (Romans 10:9-11). Those who reject Christ and His Gospel have no hope of salvation.

In a sense, then, God has a double set of record books: one, Law, and the other, Gospel. The book of Revelation describes the judgment scene in this way: “**Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life**” (Revelation 20:11-12). The books are the books of law in which God knows everything about every single person who has ever lived. But, on the other hand, the Book of Life is the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The final judgment will proceed as follows: “**And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire**” (Revelation 20:12-15). The city of new Jerusalem is described in Revelation 21. There we read: “**There shall by no means enter it anything that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life**” (Revelation 21:27). Notice that the Book of Life is called the Lamb’s Book of Life, indicating that those whose names are written in that book are believers in the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, who has taken away the sin of the world. The Book of Life is referred to also in Revelation 3:5; 13:8; 17:8, as well as in Philippians 4:3.

But according to the books (the law) no one passes the test. For the works of all are imperfect and do not measure up to God’s standard. This is what the apostle Paul taught consistently. “**By the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin**” (Romans 3:20). “**By the works of the law no flesh will be justified**” (Galatians 2:16). The only hope for sinful mankind is that other Book, the Book of Life, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Those whose names are in the Book of

Life are spared, that is, those who trust in the one Savior God has provided for sinful human beings. But “**anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.**” This agrees perfectly with Jesus’ teaching: “**He who believes (the Gospel) ... will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned**” (Mark 16:16).

The prophet Daniel had already spoken of the judgment as a day on which the books would be opened. Daniel said: “**I watched till thrones were put in place, and the Ancient of Days was seated. ... A fiery stream issued and came forth before Him. A thousand thousands ministered to Him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him. The court was seated, and the books were opened**” (Daniel 7:9-10). Daniel also referred to the other book, the Book of Life, in these words: “**At that time your people shall be delivered, every one who is found written in the book**” (Daniel 12:1).

Everything depends on our spiritual connection with the Lord Jesus Christ. For this reason Jesus said to the seventy helpers He sent out as His messengers with the authority to proclaim His teaching and heal the sick: “**Do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven**” (Luke 10:20). Those who believe in Jesus Christ do indeed have their names written in heaven; their names are in the Book of Life.

This, then, is how we must understand Jesus’ description of Judgment Day in Matthew 25:31-46. Those on Jesus’ right hand are His sheep. We know how Jesus described His sheep: “**My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand**” (John 10:27-28). On the other hand, Jesus said to those who opposed Him: “**You do not believe, because you are not of My sheep**” (John 10:26). The great final separation is made based on whether persons are believers in Jesus or not, whether they are Jesus’ sheep or not, whether they are in the Book of Life or not.

Then, after the separation has been made, Jesus points out that His sheep have done all kinds of good things to Him, because they had done good things for the least of His brethren. Their faith in Jesus was not a fruitless faith, but a faith that showed itself in love for Jesus and His spiritual brothers. To those sheep on His right hand Jesus says: “**Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world**” (Matthew 25:34).

On the other hand, Jesus will say to those on His left: “**Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels**” (Matthew 25:41). Notice that the fire was prepared not for them, but for the devil and his angels. The Lord does not want anyone to perish in everlasting fire. He desires all to be saved, and that is why He sent Jesus into the world to suffer and die for all, and that is why the Holy Spirit is at work through the Gospel to save all. The Gospel is a Gospel for all sinners, for Jesus is the Lamb of God who has taken away the sin of the world. Hell was not made for people, and yet those who reject the Savior Jesus and the Holy Spirit’s invitation will have to share the destiny of the devil and his angels.

Whatever good works these unbelievers may have done in this world from a human viewpoint, they are not regarded as good by God because they have not been done out of love for Him. God does not recognize anything they have done as good, for without faith it is impossible to please God. And so Jesus concludes His account of the final judgment by saying: “**These will go away into everlasting punishment; but the righteous into eternal life**” (Matthew 25:46).

God’s sentence of eternal condemnation will also be imposed on Satan and all his army. It is written: “**God did not spare the angels who sinned, but cast them down to hell and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment**” (2 Peter 2:4). “**The angels who did not keep their proper domain, but left their own abode, He has reserved in everlasting chains under darkness for the judgment of the great day**” (Jude 6). At that time “**the Lord**” will also deal with the Antichrist, whom He will “**destroy with the brightness of His coming**” (2 Thessalonians 2:8).

The final judgment will make all things right. Those who deserve to be punished will be punished, while those who have trusted in God's mercy during their earthly sufferings and persecutions will be delivered. The psalmist Asaph was perturbed because it seemed that God was treating evildoers much better than believers. But finally Asaph understood, as he says: "**When I thought how to understand this, it was too painful for me – until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I understood their end. Surely You set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction**" (Psalm 73:16-18). Unbelievers should not think they will escape punishment for their sins because they are prospering in this world. They will get their rightful reward on the Last Day. The apostle Paul addresses them with these words: "**In accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to each one according to his deeds**" (Romans 2:5-6).

The Christians in Thessalonica were undergoing many tribulations and persecutions because of their confession of faith in Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul gave them this assurance: "**We ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure, which is manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer; since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, and to give you who are troubled rest with us when 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. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed**" (2 Thessalonians 1:4-10).

Notice that the final judgment will reverse the situation on earth. Those who were troubled will be relieved; those who troubled them will be troubled. There will be righteousness and mercy for the oppressed; there will be righteous justice for the persecutors. But notice the dividing line is between the believers who obey (trust in) the Gospel and those who do not.

Jesus shows us in Matthew 25:31-46 that the good works of His believing sheep will be publicized on that day. What about the sins of the believers? Will they be publicized also? It does not seem so. The new covenant announced by Jeremiah includes the statement: "**And their sin I will remember no more**" (Jeremiah 31:34). This verse is also quoted in Hebrews 10:17. King Hezekiah prayed to God: "**You have cast all my sins behind Your back**" (Isaiah 38:17). God says to Isaiah: "**I will not remember your sins**" (Isaiah 43:25). The prophet Micah spoke likewise to God: "**You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea**" (Micah 7:19). Notice also that in Matthew 25 there is mention of the sins of the goats on the left hand but no mention of the sins of Jesus' believers on the right hand.

Questions

1. What are some things that will happen on the day of judgment?
2. What separation will take place on the day of judgment?
3. Who has been appointed to be the Judge on the day of judgment?
4. Who will appear before the Judge on the day of judgment?
5. Who will serve as judges alongside the chief Judge?
6. In what sense have all the sins of the world been already judged?
7. On what basis will the separation take place on the day of judgment?
8. Prove that your answer to Question 7 is correct.
9. What is the difference between the books and the Book of Life?
10. Why will Jesus refer to the good works of believers on Judgment Day?
11. How will God's justice be displayed on the day of judgment?
12. What does God say about the sins of believers?
13. How can one prepare for the day of judgment?
14. Why is it important to be prepared at all times for the day of judgment?