

This morning is the second Sunday of Advent, the season in which we look back at Jesus' first coming over 2000 years ago and look ahead to second coming, his final return to judge the world and put an end to sin and evil and death and bring heaven and earth together forever in the new heavens and new earth. This week, we will be looking at the final judgment, as judgment is a theme running throughout Isaiah. Next week, we will look at the new heavens and new earth, and on December 21st, we will look at the heart of Jesus's second coming.

We will begin this morning with a couple passages from Isaiah, as we are nearing the end of a sermon series that I am calling "The gospel according to Isaiah" which is taking us through much of the Old Testament book of Isaiah. Isaiah was what was known as a covenant mediator prophet, people who were called by God to be His spokesperson, to call out the sin of the nation and call them to repent of their sin and return to faithfulness to the covenant that God had made with them at Mt. Sinai, after He had led them out of Egypt. Isaiah prophesied to Judah, the southern part of Israel, from about 740-687 BC. The book of Isaiah can be broken up into two parts. Chapters 1-39 are mainly about God's judgment of Israel and the surrounding nations for their sins. Chapters 40-66 are mainly about the restoration God will bring to His people once their time of discipline is completed. But as I mentioned, one of the themes running throughout Isaiah is that of judgment and the day of the Lord. For instance:

Isaiah 13:9–13 - See, the day of the Lord is coming—a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger—to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it. ¹⁰ The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light. ¹¹ I will punish the world for its evil, the wicked for their sins. I will put an end to the arrogance of the haughty and will humble **the pride of the ruthless**. ¹² I will make people scarcer than pure gold, more rare than the gold of Ophir. ¹³ Therefore I will make the heavens tremble; and the earth will shake from its place at the wrath of the Lord Almighty, in the day of his burning anger.

Isaiah 66:15–16, 22-24 - See, the Lord is coming with fire, and his chariots are like a whirlwind; he will bring down his anger with fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. ¹⁶ For with fire and with his sword the Lord will execute judgment on all people, and many will be those slain by the Lord. "As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me," declares the Lord, "so will your name **and descendants endure**." ²³ From one New Moon to another and from one Sabbath to another, all mankind will come and bow down before me," says the Lord. ²⁴ "And they will go out and look on the dead bodies of those who rebelled

against me; the worms that eat them will not die, the fire that burns them will not be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind.”

Passages like these are why I try to preach through entire books of the Bible if at all possible, because it forces me to confront subjects that are uncomfortable, like the idea of a final judgment. Because as uncomfortable as it is to face these kind of passages, it is absolutely essential for us to understand if we are to live rightly. Consider:

Hebrews 9:27–28 - Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment,²⁸ so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

You will die, and there will be a final exam. What will the test be on, so that I don't waste my time on what does not matter? If there is going to be an evaluation of your life, on what will you be tested, so to speak?

There is much that is a mystery that I must admit that I am only giving my best educated guess at what the Bible says. But let me go my best to address the final judgment by sharing four misconceptions about judgment:

1) Judgment is a bad thing

As I said, judgment is not a popular topic, and is actually an embarrassing thing for many American Christians. But in the Bible, believe it or not, judgment is something to be celebrated:

Psalm 98:4–9 - Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music;⁵ make music to the Lord with the harp, with the harp and the sound of singing,⁶ with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn—shout for joy before the Lord, the King.⁷ Let the sea resound, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.⁸ Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy;⁹ let them sing before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity.

Sing and dance because he comes to judge the earth! What does that mean? What are we missing that would cause the Psalmist to celebrate the coming judgment?

As NT Wright put in his book *Surprised by Hope*: “There will be a judgment where God will set the world right once and for all. For most people, judgment is a good thing. In a world of systematic injustice, bullying, violence, arrogance, and oppression, the thought that there might come a day when the wicked are firmly put in their place and the poor and weak are given their due is the best news there can be. Faced with a world in rebellion, a world full of exploitation and wickedness, a good God must be a God of judgment.”

Just as a good Judge must be one who holds evildoers accountable, a good God must be a God of judgment. One day, God will come to put things right. Calls to mind the ancient circuit judge, who would go from town to town to bring justice to a people.

Or consider Daniel 7. In this passage, Daniel sees four great beasts that stand for four kingdoms that are to come upon the earth. And after those beasts, he sees this:

Daniel 7:13–14 - “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. ¹⁴ 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.”

The empires of this world are like beasts, but God will give Jesus, the Messiah, authority to judge evil and to establish an everlasting kingdom of justice and love. Jesus saw Himself as the fulfillment of the Son of Man who was talked about in Daniel 7:

John 5:22–29 – “Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, ²³ that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him. ²⁴ Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life. ²⁵ Very truly I tell you, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and **those who hear will live**. ²⁶ For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. ²⁷ And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man. ²⁸ Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice ²⁹ and come out—those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned.”

Not only is it good news that God will judge, it is good news that **Jesus will be the judge**, the man of sorrows, familiar with suffering, who loved sinners and died for them. **We may have lots of questions about judgment day, but we can trust that surely He will judge with perfect justice and compassion in a way that a human being never could.**

2) Believing in a judging God will cause his followers to be judgmental people

If you believe that God will judge, does that not make his followers judgmental people? Not at all. The best explanation I have heard comes from Miroslav Volf, a Yale theologian and Croatian who lived through the violence in the Balkans, wrote this in his book *Exclusion and Embrace*: “If God were not angry at injustice and deception and did not make a final end to violence – that God would not be worthy of worship... The only means of prohibiting all recourse to violence by ourselves is to insist that violence is legitimate only when it comes from God... My thesis is that the practice of non-violence requires a belief in divine vengeance will be **unpopular with many in the West**... But it takes the quiet of a suburban home for the birth of the thesis that human non-violence (results from the belief in) God’s refusal to judge. In a sun-scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, it will invariably die... [with] other pleasant captivities of the liberal mind.” For those who are used to oppression and suffering, a God of judgment is a thing to be celebrated.

As Volf said, believing in a God who will judge and put a final end to violence means that we do not need to get the sword and kill our enemies. We can love, forgive, and trust God to act in justice. This is a common theme in the New Testament writings:

Romans 14:9–12 - For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living. ¹⁰ You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat. ¹¹ It is written: “‘As surely as I live,’ says the Lord, ‘every knee will bow before me; every tongue will acknowledge God.’” ¹² So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

Who are you to judge your neighbor? If there is no God, then justice is up to you. If people can steal and kill and rape and cheat and lie and get away with it in the end, then we must put them in their place. But if God will sort it out in the end, then we can trust Him to judge.

1 Peter 2:23 - When they hurled their insults at [Jesus], he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

Christians who believe in a God who will judge in the end should be the most loving and forgiving people.

3) We will only be judged on the basis of what we have done

Some mistakenly believe that all God is going to do is just weigh our good deeds and bad deeds, and that unless you did something really bad, you'll go to heaven. That ultimately judgment is about your resume, so to speak. To them, Jesus says this:

Matthew 7:21–23 - “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’ ²³ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’”

On that day, many good, religious people will be shocked to find that Jesus never knew them, that despite their good works, they did not know the Judge. Do you know Him? More importantly, does He know you? This salvation has nothing to do with your resume, but everything to do with whether or not you have repented of your sins and turned to faith in Christ, trusting Him for your salvation.

John 3:36 – “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him.”

Because here's the challenge for us – **if God has set a day on which he will put a final end to all sin and evil and death, how will we, who have evil within us and have perpetrated evil deeds on this world, ever survive that judgment?** Are we to put all our hope in our good deeds outweighing our bad deeds? No – the Bible proclaims that there is a better way:

Ephesians 2:8-9 - For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.

It is by Jesus' death on the cross for our sins that He became our substitute, bearing the punishment we deserved and offering us forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

Romans 3:21–26 - But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵ God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—²⁶ he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

No one will be saved on the basis of his or her resume. But for those in Jesus, there is no condemnation:

Romans 8:1–2 - Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, ² because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death.

What does this mean? Repent. Turn to faith in Jesus. And you will be saved, no matter what you have done.

And the fourth misconception is:

4) We will only be judged on the basis of our faith in Jesus

The last misconception is that all that matters when it comes to judgment is whether or not you know him. You prayed a prayer of salvation; after that who cares how you lived. So what is he judging us on?

2 Corinthians 5:10 - For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

The New Testament differentiates between the Great White Throne judgment, which is for all humanity on the basis of whether or not they have trusted in Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins (see Revelation 20:11-15), and the judgment seat of

Christ, the bema, which is for believers and is not about our salvation but is about our rewards. Jesus is the judge, and we will be judged based on what we have done.

Revelation 20:11–15 - Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and the heavens fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. ¹² And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as **recorded in the books**. ¹³ The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what they had done. ¹⁴ Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. ¹⁵ Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.

On what will we be judged?

So if we are going to be judged on what we have done, what does that mean? Let me share three examples of what we will be judged on that are given in Scripture:

1) Whether or not the works we have done were for Jesus - How we have “built” our lives

1 Corinthians 3:10–15 - By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. ¹¹ For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹² If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, ¹³ their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will **bring it to light**. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person’s work. ¹⁴ If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames.

According to this passage, some will be saved because Jesus knows them, but all that they have spent their life doing will be burned up in the end. How you build your life will be judged. Every word you have spoken. Even your motives matter.

1 Corinthians 4:5 - Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart. At that time each will receive their praise from God.

The good news is that every little thing you do for the Lord matters.

2) What you did with the resources God gave you.

Matthew 25:14–30 - “Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. ¹⁵ To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. ¹⁶ The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more. ¹⁷ So also, the one with two bags of gold gained two more. ¹⁸ But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground and **hid his master’s money**. ¹⁹ After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ The man who had received five bags of gold brought the other five. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with five bags of gold. See, I have gained five more.’ ²¹ His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. **Come and share your master’s happiness!**’ ²² The man with two bags of gold also came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with two bags of gold; see, I have gained two more.’ ²³ His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’ ²⁴ Then the man who had received one bag of gold came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have **not scattered seed**. ²⁵ So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.’ ²⁶ His master replied, ‘You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? ²⁷ Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest. ²⁸ ‘So take the bag of gold from him and give it to the **one who has ten bags**. ²⁹ For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. ³⁰ And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’”

How did you use the resources he entrusted to you? Selfishly, or for the work of His kingdom?

3) How you treated the least of these:

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. ³² 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. ³³ He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. ³⁴ 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.’ ³⁵ 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, ³⁶ 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.’ ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you?’ ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ ⁴⁰ 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.’ ⁴¹ 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. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ 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.’ ⁴⁴ 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?’ ⁴⁵ 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.’ ⁴⁶ Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

Jesus’ point is that we will be judged on the basis of how we treated the “least of these.”

One day you will stand before God, and you will be judged. If you do not know Jesus, there is some real sense in which you will be allowed to continue in that direction for all eternity.

2 Thessalonians 1:6–9 - God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you ⁷ and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. ⁸ He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.

A picture Jesus used a lot for Hell was gehenna, from the Hebrew ge hinnom. Hinnom was a valley south of Jerusalem where under Ahaz and Manasseh children were sacrificed in fire to Molech. In Jesus' day it was a burial place for criminals and for burning garbage. That was the picture he gave them for what Hell would be like – a place of burning, waste, and disintegration.

This is not a pleasant thing to think about for sure. But as C.S. Lewis put it, Hell is the great monument to human freedom. To quote C. S. Lewis, “**there are only two kinds of people – those who say ‘thy will be done’ to God or those to whom God in the end says, ‘Thy will be done.’**” Not only is God loving, but he is also just. Heaven and hell are the result of his love and justice. God honors their decisions if they chose to live without him.

But those who are saved will stand before God and be judged and receive their reward. **What will be the reward? I don't know for sure, but allow me to speculate.**

Don't think about the concept of heavenly reward as getting a bigger mansion, or more jewels in your crown, or a house closer to the throne. Think of reward in another way: It's like all the hard work you put into your golf game so that you can receive the reward of being able to go out there and hit the ball straight and long. All the hard work you put into your marriage or friendship so that one day you really enjoy the other person. Learning another language so that you can read the great poets and philosopher in their own language. Working at piano so that the reward is your ability to play freely and beautifully. These are all example of rewards that are organically connected to the activity. The reward of giving yourself to the service of God, delighting yourself in Him, is that one day you will receive the reward of that sacrifice and dedication, and it will make the sacrifice seem like nothing in comparison.

Or think of it another way – If heaven were a **basketball game**, the greatest reward would go to those who gave themselves fully to learning the game of basketball, for they would be able to most fully enjoy it and play most skillfully and have the most to contribute. What if heaven were an **orchestra**? Those who dedicated themselves to the instrument would enjoy it the most. The reward goes to those who worked to prepare themselves for what was to come. **But heaven is neither a basketball game nor an orchestra; heaven is love. It is service to God and service to each other. It is loving God and loving neighbor with all your heart. It is reigning over the world, playing a part in the re-creation of the world.** The ones who will receive their reward in full will be those who gave themselves fully to that end on earth. Those who dedicated their skills and talents to the service of God will see

those talents enhanced and ennobled and given back to them to be exercised to His glory. Your striving for holiness will be rewarded in the holy new heavens and new earth, because you will be best prepared to live in that place.

Give yourself fully to the work of the Lord, because it is never in vain.

Remember the end of Schindler's List, where Oskar Schindler, looking out at the sea of people he has saved, breaks down as he realizes that he could have done more? He is overwhelmed by the money he wasted, the car, the gold pin, the things that could have been sold in order to purchase the freedom of more Jews. While the regret may not be there in heaven, it is worth reflecting on that scene in the light of judgment day. On that day we will realize what really matters, and those who gave themselves fully to the work of the Lord will be rewarded, while those who wasted their life on things that did not matter will miss out on greater joy and reward.

Remember Paul in **1 Thessalonians 2:19-20** - For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? ²⁰ Indeed, you are our glory and joy.

On that day we will see all the people who we influenced towards God, and they will be our glory and joy. Just like Schindler seeing all the people who were there because of him and wishing he had done more, we will likely glory in those who are there in part because of our lives. Live in the light of that day. Give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord so that your reward will be great on that day.

1 Corinthians 15:58 - Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.