

The Last Day and Final Judgment

Closely connected to all that God has to say to us about death and heaven and hell in the Scriptures are His words to us about the end of the world, its Last Day and the final judgment. As certain as death and heaven and hell are, just so certain is it that one day the world as we know it will end. This is what Jesus is alluding to in today's Gospel from Mark 13. Even as He ascended into heaven the angels sealed His visible departure from the disciples with the promise: "This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen Him go into heaven," (Acts 1:11). In so many of His parables Jesus spoke of His return on the Last Day, of the final judgment, and of its significance for the whole of our lives on earth. Read especially Matthew 22-25. So much of what Jesus tells us there is intended to prepare us for our end in death and our appearance on the Last Day before His throne of judgment.

Again, with this topic, as with the subjects of death and heaven and hell, we often have more questions than answers. For just as our death takes place in time but plunges us into eternity, so also the Last Day begins with a point in time but quickly passes all of humanity into eternity. In eternity, time and space either cease to be relevant or have different definitions than we can grasp in the here and now. So the Holy Spirit in His Word accommodates Himself to our limitations. He gives us a number of pointers to the reality of the Last Day, to foretaste of it and of the certainty of its coming.

In the Old Testament, for example, there are the promises of the destruction of Jerusalem. Ezekiel foretold it often and graphically (e.g., Ezekiel 7). And the prophecies were fulfilled to the letter in 586 B.C. (cf. 2 Kings 25; 2 Chronicles 36; and Daniel's great prayer in Daniel 9). Likewise, Jesus foretold the destruction of Jerusalem again (Matthew 13:1-2; Mark 13:2; Luke 19:41-44). That prophecy too was fulfilled to the letter in the year A.D. 70 when Titus destroyed Jerusalem.

The point is that just as those promises of God were fulfilled, so too will the promise be carried out that one day the world will end, and all will be judged. Indeed, so often when Jesus speaks of the coming destruction of Jerusalem, He seamlessly mixes in elements of the destruction of the world on the Last Day: the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. and again in A.D. 70 and indeed all the other prophecies of the destruction of one kingdom and nation after another, all of these serve as a prelude and prefiguring of the destruction on the Last Day. What then can we say about that Last Day and last judgment?

First of all, a Last Day will most surely come, and on that day Christ will return visibly just as He promised (Matthew 26:64; Mark 13:26; Acts 1:11; 1 Thessalonians 4:16; Titus 2:13).

Second, when He returns, all the dead will rise and all will appear before His throne for judgment (John 5:28-29; Matthew 25:32; Acts 24:15; 2 Corinthians 5:10). On that day all will be seen with bodies and souls reunited. Is this judgment any different from the judgment of those who died before the Last Day? Is it somehow different from that judgment received in the hour of their death? It is certainly no different in the verdict; those who died in unbelief and went to hell will receive the same verdict on the Last Day. Likewise, those who died and went to heaven need not fear a reversal of the blessed verdict they received in the hour of death (Hebrews 9:27; Revelation 14:13).

If the verdict is the same, then what point is there in this judgment on the Last Day? The best that we can say is that the first judgment was an individual judgment. But the judgment on the Last Day is Christ's great triumph day when all will see Him and worship Him, even those who are doomed to eternal destruction (Philippians 2:10-11). The worship, of course, of those condemned will not be the joyful worship of the believers. Rather, it will be the worship of despair with the confession that God is just in their condemnation. But it is a day of great triumph and joy for both the saints in heaven and the believers who are still living on earth on that Last Day. For on that day all will see with their own eyes the final fulfillment of all that God has promised in His Word. That was the confidence of Job (Job 19:25-26). That was the expectation of Paul (1 Thessalonians 4:16; 2 Thessalonians 2:8-12), and that was the repeated promise of Jesus (e.g., John 6:40).