

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

The Church in Heaven*

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THE JUDGMENT OF THE CHURCH IN HEAVEN

1

After meeting Christ in the air at the time of the rapture, the church will proceed to heaven. There, according to many New Testament passages, the church will be judged for reward. If the rapture concerns only Christians, it is evident that only Christians will be involved in this judgment as only such will be eligible for the rapture itself. If Israel and other Old Testament saints are raised at the time of the rapture, they also may be judged or their judgment may be reserved to a later time, namely, the time of Christ's second coming to the earth when their rewards will be distributed in the form of privileged places of service in the millennial kingdom. As the judgment of the church does not concern the matter of salvation, it is primarily a question of rewards for service.

The central passage on the judgment of the church is 2 Corinthians 5:8–10: “We are of good courage, I say, and are willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be at home with the Lord. Wherefore also we make it our aim, whether at home or absent, to be well-pleasing unto him. For we must all be made manifest before the judgment-seat of Christ; that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he hath done, whether it be good or bad.” Paul declares that it is his fundamental purpose in life to live in such a way that his life will be well spent in the Master's service. When he is judged at this judgment seat, it will be determined what is good and what is bad.

Although some have attempted to make this a Protestant purgatory, i.e., a time of punishment for unconfessed sin, it seems clear from the general doctrine of justification by faith that no condemnation is possible for one who is in Christ. Discipline such as is administered in this life will be of no value to those already made perfect in heaven. The bad works are discarded as unworthy of reward but good works are rewarded. The penalty is limited to the loss of reward. It is obvious that with imperfections which beset every Christian, no one will be able to claim perfection in that day. All will have a measure of failure, and it may be that all will have some reward. The judgment will be a general evaluation of a summary kind, but it is gracious rather than retributive.

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Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

The judgment seat of Christ, however, is a real issue with Paul. He speaks of “knowing therefore the fear of the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:11). This fear is of the possibility that his life will be revealed as one wasted and spent in selfishness rather than in devotion and complete obedience to Christ. Christians contemplating the rapture of the church, therefore, must also face the fact that their lives will then be brought in review before God and that they will be rewarded according to what they have done.

2

Three figures are used in the New Testament to illustrate the principles involved in the judgment seat of Christ. The first of these is found in Romans 14:10–12: “But thou, why dost thou judge thy brother? or thou again, why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment-seat of God. For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, to me every knee shall bow, and every tongue shall confess to God. So then each one of us shall give account of himself to God.” In this passage life is viewed as a stewardship with every Christian having to give an account of his stewardship at the judgment seat of Christ. An application is made of this truth that we should not judge each other, but rather should give our principal attention to fulfilling our own stewardship in such a way that we will have a good report when we must render account.

In 1 Corinthians 3:11–15 the figure of a building is used to illustrate the principle of judgment. In verse 11 the foundation of the building is revealed to be Christ who as Savior provides a foundation for every Christian life. On this foundation every man must build his building. Ultimately the building is to be tested by fire which “shall prove each man’s work of what sort it is” (1 Cor. 3:13). When tested in this way, reward is promised for that which abides and loss is assured for that which is burned: “If any man’s work shall abide which he built thereon, he shall receive a reward. If any man’s work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss, but he himself shall be saved; yet so as through fire” (1 Cor. 3:14–15). In view of the fact that the building is to be tested by fire, Christians are urged to build their house of gold, silver, and precious stone which is incombustible in contrast to wood, hay, or stubble which is easily consumed by fire (cf. 1 Cor. 3:12).

No meaning is assigned to the particular materials mentioned from Scriptural background. However, gold is often used to represent the glory of deity; silver is the metal of redemption, and precious stones reflect wealth of other kind. The use of these materials undoubtedly reflects Christian life and witness which as gold manifest the glory of God, as silver the extension of the gospel, and, as precious stones, accomplish many things which are of value in God’s sight. By contrast, wood, hay, and stubble represent three degrees of worthlessness, stubble being fit for nothing. Hay is suitable only for beasts. Wood, while being a useful tool of man, can also be destroyed by fire. The final test of all man’s work is what evaluation is placed upon it at the judgment seat of Christ. Christians, accordingly, are urged to build a life which embodies eternal values.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

A third figure is found in 1 Corinthians 9:24–27 where life is compared to an athletic contest: “Know ye not that they that run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? Even so run; that ye may attain. And every man that striveth in the games exerciseth self-control in all things. Now they do it to receive a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, as not uncertainly; so fight I, as not beating the air: but I buffet my body, and bring it into bondage; lest by any means, after that I have preached to others, I myself should be rejected.” The objective in a race is to win the prize and to this end all minor considerations must be put aside.

In like manner the Christian’s goal is to receive reward at the judgment seat of Christ, and therefore he must accomplish the will of God. The Apostle Paul not only likens life to a race, but also to a boxing match where he beats his own body in order to bring it under subjection. The figure speaks of self-discipline and self-control. The reward promised is an incorruptible crown in contrast to the corruptible crown of laurel leaves which soon faded away, so often given athletes in Greek contests. Paul wanted to live and preach in such a way that he himself might not be considered worthless at the judgment seat of Christ. The term *rejected* refers to his rewards and life rather than to his personal salvation, and Paul had in mind that an athlete who did not conform to the rules would have his victory disallowed.

In addition to these figures of speech, Christ in the seven messages to the churches of Asia in Revelation 2–3 challenges those in each church to live in the will of God that they might receive their proper reward at the judgment seat of Christ. No more searching analysis can be made of any human work than the question of Christ’s evaluation at that future tribunal.

THE MARRIAGE UNION OF CHRIST AND THE CHURCH

As indicated in some earlier discussion, the present work of Christ and the church is set forth in the figure of Christ as the Bridegroom and the church as the bride. The future aspect of this includes the consummation of the marriage union between Christ and His church. In keeping with the oriental symbolism, the church in its relation to Christ will follow the pattern of the customary marriage in Christ’s day. The first step in such a marriage was the legal union consummated when the parents of the bridegroom and the bride agreed on the marriage and entered into formal contract in which the dowry was paid. As fulfilled in the symbolism of Christ in the church, this occurs at the moment an individual believes in Christ as his Savior and accepts the payment of his redemption which Christ Himself paid on the cross. The bride accepts this situation and acknowledges Christ as her loved one as well as her Redeemer. Throughout the present age, Christ is preparing His bride for the future consummation as indicated in Ephesians 5:26. The church as a pure virgin is awaiting the coming of her Bridegroom as indicated

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

in 2 Corinthians 11:2. The first phase of the marriage is an indication of the grace of God, for while the Bridegroom is altogether lovely, the bride has little to commend herself in natural or spiritual beauty. The transformation into a lovely bride is made possible by the grace of God.

The second phase of the wedding is marked by a procession of the bridegroom to the home of the bride accompanied by his friends often at a late hour at night as illustrated in the parable of the ten virgins (Matt. 25:1–13). In the case of Christ, this will be fulfilled at the rapture of the church when Christ the Bridegroom comes from the Father's house to the earth to receive His bride and take her back to the place that He has prepared for her (John 14:1–3). When this event takes place, the church will be forever with the Lord, and the marriage union is consummated.

A third aspect of an oriental wedding was the marriage feast held for the benefit of guests. The ten virgins of Matthew 25 were such guests as well as others. There has been some difference of opinion as to whether the symbolism of the marriage feast is fulfilled in heaven following the rapture or whether it will be on earth in connection with the second coming of Christ. On the basis of Revelation 19:7–9 the wedding feast is announced at the close of the tribulation and is related to the second coming of Christ to the earth. For this reason, many feel that the wedding feast will have its fulfillment spiritually in the millennium itself when saints of all ages will be present to join in the festivities with Christ the Bridegroom and the church as the bride. The fact that the wedding feast is announced in Revelation 19 prior to the second coming of Christ is another indication that the rapture itself must have already occurred as the Bridegroom goes for His bride before the wedding feast. The two illustrations in Matthew (22:1–14; 25:1–13) both picture the wedding feast on earth and lead to the conclusion that the wedding feast is related to Christ's second coming to the earth and the millennial kingdom which will follow. In both of these instances in Matthew, the bride is not mentioned. According to oriental custom the bride did not necessarily attend the wedding feast although, as a matter of fact, the church as the bride will be present in the millennial scene.

The figure of marriage wonderfully illustrates the love of Christ for His church which prompted Him to give Himself for it (Eph. 5:25) which explains His present work for His church (Eph. 5:26) and which will be brought to consummation at the rapture when the church, perfect in every way, is presented to the Bridegroom (Eph. 5:27).¹

¹ Walvoord, J. F. (1966). "The Church in Heaven." *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 123, 99–103.