

The Judgment of the Nations

by John F. Walvoord

The judgment of the nations is a significant event in the divine dealings with a wicked world, where the righteous will be separated from the unrighteous and ushered into the millennial kingdom.

Topics: "Divine Judgment", "Eschatology"

Description

John F. Walvoord preaches about the divine judgment of the Gentiles, emphasizing the sovereignty of God over creation and the inevitable divine judgment that awaits the Gentiles. The judgment of the nations marks the end of the times of the Gentiles and anticipates the final judgment at the Great White Throne. The judgment, taking place on earth after the second coming of Christ, separates the righteous from the unrighteous based on their works of kindness towards others, serving as evidence of their salvation through faith and grace.

Transcript

In the broad program of divine dealings with the Gentiles, the sovereignty of God over creation is revealed in an unusual way. Although God in His sovereign grace has allowed Gentiles to assume great power and in the words of Christ, "Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled" (Luke 21:24), the consummation of this program inevitably brings the Gentiles before God for much-deserved divine judgment.

The history of the world has demonstrated that mankind is not judged once but many times. God has already exercised His judgment upon angels, Adam and Eve, and many particular judgments have fallen upon individuals, cities, and nations. In the flood of Noah the entire world was subject to disciplinary judgment. Towering above all judgments in history is the fact that Christ on the cross was judged as the sin bearer for mankind and that there Satan also was judged and defeated (John 16:11). Christians in this present age of grace also experience the disciplinary judgment of God (I Corinthians 11:32). Throughout the whole period of the tribulation and especially in the great tribulation judgment after judgment is poured out upon the world.

In this sequence the judgment of the nations assumes great significance and is one of the important milestones in divine dealing with a wicked world. That it is not the final judgment is evident, for other judgments will follow at the end of the millennium and the final judgment of all will be at the Great White Throne. The judgment of the nations, however, is important as bringing to a close one of the major phases of divine dealings, namely, the times of the Gentiles, and in a preliminary way anticipates the judgment of

all unsaved men which will occur a thousand years later. The confusion which has arisen in the attempt to make this the judgment of all men, including both the resurrected and translated saints as well as the wicked, is corrected by careful attention to the exact text of Matthew 25:31-46 where the details of the judgment are given.

The Time Of The Judgment

The passage is introduced by a time clause indicating when the judgment will take place in the tremendous sequence of events related to the second coming: "When the Son of man shall come in his glory" (Matthew 25:31). The context indicates that this is the coming of Christ to the earth in connection with the establishment of His earthly kingdom. The judgment, therefore, is distinguished in time from judgments that relate to the judgment seat of Christ occurring in connection with the rapture of the church, and from all historic judgments that precede as well as the many judgments that are poured upon the earth during the great tribulation. It follows the second coming of Christ to the earth, and precedes and is a preparation for His reign on earth for a thousand years. Therefore it is also distinguished from any judgments on rebellion during His kingdom reign and from the final judgment of the Great White Throne at the end of the millennium.

The Place Of The Judgment

From the context it is also clear that the place of the judgment is earth, not heaven. The phrase, "the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him," is a picture of Christ and the angels coming from heaven to the earth. This is substantiated by another time clause, "Then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory" (Matthew 25:31). This is not the throne of God in heaven, but rather the earthly throne predicted by the prophets. It is the beginning of the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy, "Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth" (Jeremiah 23:5). The place of this judgment, therefore, is the millennial earth not heaven.

The Subjects Of The Judgment

In Matthew 25:32 the subjects of this divine judgment are clearly declared to be "all nations." The passage could be translated "all Gentiles" as the Greek word is *ethne*. This is a common word found frequently in the Bible and generally used of non-Jewish races. Although occasionally used of the Jews themselves (cp. Luke 7:5; 23:2; John 11:48, 50, 51, 52; 18:35; Acts 10:22; etc.), the more common meaning is to refer to Gentiles as distinguished from Jews, for instance in the references in Romans 11:13; 15:27; 16:4; Galatians 2:12. In some passages the Gentile character of the word is the main thought as in Romans 3:29; 9:24.

The context here indicates that the nations or the Gentiles should be viewed as the non-Jewish population of the world. In the narrative they are contrasted to "my brethren" (Matthew 25:40) who in the passage are distinguished from both the sheep and the goats, which comprise the entire mass of the Gentiles. In order to maintain the distinctions, it is best to understand it as referring to the non-Jewish peoples of the world. However, a similar judgment awaits the Jewish people (Ezekiel 20:34-38) and the issue is not whether both Jews and Gentiles are judged, but rather whether this passage concerns itself primarily with the Gentiles. In view of the fact that this is the climax of the times of the Gentiles, it seems appropriate that a special judgment should be applied to these who have oppressed Israel throughout their history.

From the English word nations some have inferred that what is dealt with here are political entities or countries as such. This is not at all indicated by the word *ethne*, a racial rather than an organizational term, and the details of the prophecy are such that they can be applied only to individuals and not to groups. The expression "all nations" therefore is best understood as referring to all Gentiles and more specifically all Gentiles who are living on earth at this time. It should be understood that many Gentiles at the time of the second coming of Christ were also already judged in the very act of divine wrath being poured on the armies gathered in the Middle East according to Revelation 19:17-21. As this is an earlier event in connection with the second advent, it must be assumed that we have here living Gentiles who were non-combatants or not involved in this great struggle.

The Basis Of The Judgment

This passage in Matthew 25 is a remarkable one in that works are prominent. According to the Scriptures, as all Gentiles are gathered before Christ to be judged they are divided into two classes, one described as "sheep" and the other designated "goats." According to Matthew 25:33, "he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left." Having made this arbitrary division, He then justifies what He is doing by addressing Himself first to the sheep. In graphic language Christ in His role as "the King" declares to the sheep on his right hand: "Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me" (Matthew 25:34-36).

The declaration by Christ is remarkable because attention is called to certain rather ordinary works such as feeding the hungry, giving the thirsty drink, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and those in prison. Furthermore, Christ declares that they who have done these things have done them to Him personally.

The righteous accordingly answer Him with the question, "Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?" (Matthew 25:37-39).

In reply Christ as "the King" states, "Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matthew 25:40).

In contrast to this, Christ then turns to those on the left hand described as goats and declares, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels: For I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat; I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not" (Matthew 25:41-43). In like manner the goats replied asking when they had neglected these works of mercy. The judgment then is pronounced upon the goats by Christ, "Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me. And these shall go away into everlasting punishment; but the righteous into life eternal" (Matthew 25:45, 46).

This passage has troubled expositors for it seems to indicate that the sheep go into life eternal because of their righteous works whereas the wicked are condemned because of their failure to do these prescribed deeds of kindness. The question is naturally raised whether a person can be saved by works. If any passage in the Bible seems to imply it, this would be the passage.

When other Scriptures are brought to bear upon the question of whether people can be saved by works, it soon becomes evident that salvation by works is an impossibility under any circumstances. Although grace may be revealed in different degrees in different dispensations, it is evident from the very doctrine that all men are sinners, that all men are spiritually dead, and that no amount of good works can reverse the sentence of death or change the sinful nature of man. Works can never be the ground of man's salvation. There can be no cure for depravity, Adamic sin, and obvious human failure found in every life, other than the grace of God. Hence, while there may be different dispensations with varying rules of life there can be only one way of salvation, namely, through Christ and His provided redemption. The question remains then how this passage in its plain emphasis on works can be justified.

The answer is first of all found in the fact that in every dispensation works are not the ground of salvation, but rather they are the evidence of salvation. It is always true that "faith without works is dead" (James 2:26). This does not mean that a man is saved by works, but it does mean that one who really trusts God and is the recipient of divine grace will manifest this fact in a changed life. Humanly speaking, it is proper to challenge faith that does not manifest itself in some way. The passage then should be added to all others that emphasize the importance of works, not as the basis for salvation, but as the evidence of it.

A question still remains, however, concerning the precise character of these works. Is it always true that those who are kind to others and feed them and clothe them are necessarily Christians? The obvious philanthropy of many non-Christians in our modern world would seem to indicate that this cannot be taken normally as an indisputable evidence of eternal life.

The answer to the problem is found in the peculiar circumstances which form the background of the judgment. The people who are here being judged as Gentiles are those who have survived the horrors of the great tribulation. In this period which Jeremiah refers to as "the time of Jacob's trouble" (Jeremiah 30:7), anti-semitism will reach an all-time high. It is evident from the warning of Christ in Matthew 24:15-22 that the Jewish people will be hounded to the death especially in the Holy Land, and possibly throughout the world. Satanic hatred will be manifested to a degree never before achieved and will be part of the world-wide satanic deception which will cause men to believe a lie. In the words of II Thessalonians 2:11, "God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie."

Under these peculiar circumstances, under the strain and stress of satanic hatred of God and compulsion to worship the world ruler, anyone who would befriend a Jew would be a marked man. It is almost inconceivable that one who would be a true worshiper of the beast would ignore the world-wide command to exterminate the Jew. For a Gentile under these circumstances to befriend one who is designated as "my brethren" would be phenomenal and could be motivated only by a realization that the Jewish people are indeed the people of God and that their Messiah is indeed the Saviour of all who believe in Him. A simple work of kindness such as is here described therefore becomes highly significant, and in the context of this judgment one who would perform deeds of kindness would inevitably be a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. Hence, while the works are not the ground of their salvation, which inevitably must be the grace of God and the sacrifice of Christ, works are nevertheless the evidence of salvation and to this our Lord points.

It is still true that salvation is "not of works, lest any man should boast" (Ephesians 2:9) but rather by faith and by grace.

The importance of works in the final judgments of mankind here has another divine revelation. The sheep who have manifested their faith in Christ under trying circumstances by befriending a Jew are now rewarded by being ushered into the millennial kingdom with its blessings of Christ's righteous rule and beneficent care over all who trust in Him. By contrast, the goats who followed the course of this world and undoubtedly participated in the persecution of the Jewish people as well as neglecting their acts of kindness now come under the divine judgment which they justly deserve, and are cast into everlasting fire.

The Judgment

The purpose of the judgment of the Gentiles is obviously one of separation of the righteous from the unrighteous in preparation for the millennial kingdom (cp. Matthew 24:40, 41). It is a fulfillment of that which was anticipated in the parables of Matthew 13 where it was predicted that in the end the wheat and the tares would be separated, the good and the bad fish would be dealt with, and the bad fish destroyed. The millennial kingdom will begin with the entire adult population of the world limited to those who have put their trust in Christ. It will be a new beginning comparable to that following the flood when Noah and his immediate family formed the entire population of the earth.

From this context it is also evident that this is not a final judgment of the individuals concerned. Those ushered into the millennial kingdom in this judgment still are in their natural bodies, still have a natural life to live, and ultimately will either die or be translated and have their life reviewed in finality. Although there is no specific revelation of this fact, the general truth of Hebrews 9:27, "as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment," it may be concluded that the sheep will be subject to ultimate reward for their works even though at this time they are assured of eternal salvation in that they possess eternal life. In a similar way the casting of the wicked into everlasting fire should not be confused as a final judgment in which they are cast into the lake of fire which does not occur for another thousand years. It is rather that they move into a state of divine judgment described by the word "everlasting fire" such as is true both in Hades, the temporary abode of the wicked dead, and the lake of fire, the final state of the wicked. Their judgment in a word is that they are put to death physically, but subject to future judgment and final resurrection at the Great White Throne judgment. This judgment accordingly ends the times of the Gentiles and begins the millennial rule of Christ.

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