

Doctrine of the Final Judgment

The Fall of Man and a Recovery Plan

In the Garden of Eden, God offered Adam and Eve a choice between a life of obedience and immortality with their Creator (represented by the tree of life) or rebellion and death (represented by the tree of the knowledge of good and evil). They fell into sin and death, which then spread to all humanity (Gen 2-3, Rom 5:12). From the time of Adam until the coming of John the Baptist, God worked with specially chosen individuals to reveal His plan of redemption, which was finally realized in the person of Jesus Christ.

During His earthly ministry, Jesus explained that just as Moses lifted up a bronze serpent in the wilderness for the miraculous healing of the Israelites who were bitten by deadly vipers, He too would also be lifted up in crucifixion for the salvation of humanity (John 3:14-15). Christians are forgiven of their sins and transformed by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit; they will also receive the gift of eternal life at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

Salvation: Sovereignty and Free Will

To be saved, one must first have access to the gospel message, but even then, human nature is inherently sinful and hostile to God and His law (Jer 17:9, Rom 8:7). The Holy Spirit must open a person's mind and convict them of their sins (John 16:8); only then is a person able to make a free choice concerning God's offer of salvation.

Therefore, no one can come to Jesus Christ unless the Father draws him (John 6:44), but Jesus also promised that if He was lifted up, He would draw all people to Himself (John 12:32-33). The Bible does not specify when each person will receive this calling, but sooner or later, everyone will hear about the gospel and stand before the judgment seat of Jesus Christ to answer for their actions (Matt 25:31-32, 2Cor 5:10, Heb 9:27).

God's Desire

God is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance (2Pet 3:9). He is not looking for excuses to condemn people to the lake of fire on a technicality, rather He seeks to redeem the outcast and to save those who are lost (2Sam 14:14, Luke 19:10).

The Day of Judgment

The Bible reveals that there will be two great resurrections (Rev 20). The first occurs when Christ returns and Christians are raised to eternal life and rule with Christ for a thousand years (1Cor 15:22-23); the second, general resurrection occurs at the end of the Millennium when the dead will be restored to physical life in the day of judgment.

Jesus said that the men of Nineveh and the Queen of the South would rise from the dead in the judgment with the people of His generation and would condemn them for rejecting Him (Mt 12:41-42). This implies that the men of Nineveh and the Queen of the South will learn what Jesus said and did during His earthly ministry; they will learn about the gospel.

Jesus also taught that it will be more tolerable for Sodom, Gomorrah, Tyre and Sidon in the judgment than for those who heard and rejected His message (Mt 10:14-15, 11:20-24). If everyone in the general resurrection will be cast into the lake of fire (Rev 20:14-15), how can it

Doctrine of the Final Judgment

be more tolerable for one group than for another? Clearly, this statement implies that some people will receive mercy, not condemnation, when they are resurrected.

God's Justice

Jesus will judge each person based on his or her level of understanding (Luke 12:47-48). He taught that those who are spiritually blind are not accountable (John 9:40-41), while James warned that those who are teachers are under stricter judgment (James 3:1). Paul said that God had overlooked the ignorance of the Gentiles in earlier times, but now, He demands everyone everywhere to repent (Act 17:26-31); so there is some hope for the Gentiles of earlier times.

Ezekiel predicted that God will resurrect the whole house of Israel, place them in their own land and put His Spirit in them (Ezekiel 37:1-14). This is not a resurrection to eternal life because these individuals have flesh and bone (cf. 1Cor 15:50-53, Luke 24:39), which is consistent with the conditions of the second resurrection. This also implies that the judgment will involve a considerable length of time for some people.

Could there be a literal as well as figurative aspect to this passage? Many events in Israel's history were meant to foreshadow a later, and greater, fulfillment. If so, this passage suggests that the second resurrection might provide these Israelites with their first chance for salvation.

This raises several interesting questions about the final judgment. What will happen to the billions of infants, children and mentally handicapped people throughout history who died without ever having a chance to hear and understand the gospel? And, what about the billions who have died without ever seeing a Bible or hearing the name of Jesus Christ? Couldn't God resurrect them in perfect health and allow them to receive their first chance for salvation? The previous passages suggest that there is hope for them as well.

The Lake of Fire

Human beings are not inherently immortal. Paul explained that Christians must undergo a transformation from mortality to immortality in the first resurrection to inherit the kingdom of God. Their bodies will no longer be composed of flesh and blood, and they will no longer be subject to the second death in the lake of fire.

Hebrews 10:26-27 indicates that those who knowingly and willfully persist in sin can expect a fiery judgment that will consume God's adversaries. When the final judgment is finished, Jesus will consign the wicked to the lake of fire (Mt 25:31-46). The elements will melt with fervent heat, and the heavens and the earth will be transformed (2Pet 3:10-12, Rev 21:1-8).

Jesus warned His disciples not to fear those who can only kill the body, but rather Him who has the power to destroy both soul and body in Gehenna fire (Mt 10:28). Destruction is not eternal life separated from God's presence; the lake of fire is called the second death, which is the end of life. Indeed, Malachi 4:1-3 says that the wicked will be consumed by fire and reduced to ashes. There is no indication in Scripture that these people will ever again be resurrected; their punishment and destruction is eternal.