



## The End?

Many of us are struck with fear when we consider the end of life and the life thereafter. Death, judgment, heaven, and hell — these are indeed sobering topics. And, while a certain element of trepidation in the face of the “last things” is natural and good, as Christians we also face these moments with courage and hope because of Jesus Christ and what He has done for us.

Of course, if we do not know Jesus or His Word concerning last things, then it can be difficult to see how we could face these things with confidence or security. Let us see what Scripture says, so we can come to terms with God’s plan for the end of our earthly lives and life after death.

### “To live is Christ and to die is gain”

When God created Adam and Eve, he actually created them for life, not death (cf. Wis 2:21–24). Everything in the Garden of Eden was theirs to enjoy, except the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. God warned them, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (Gen 2:16–17).

They did not heed the warning and, as a result, they and all of their descendants had to experience death. God’s curse to Adam after his disobedience is plain: “In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Gen 3:19).

Death is the separation of the soul from the body and the end of our life on earth. It is the effect of original sin (cf. Rom 5:12; 1 Cor 15:22) and fundamental to the human experience (cf. Eccles 9:5; 2 Sam 14:14; Job 1:5; Ps 90:10). When that day comes, “the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it” (Eccles 12:7).

Blessedly for us, God became man and conquered death (cf. Rom 5:17; 2 Tim 1:10; Heb 2:14–15). To those who love God and their neighbors and accept God’s free gift of grace, Jesus offers us life (cf. Mt 19:17–21; 25:45–46; Lk 10:25–28; Jn 6:40; 8:51; etc). In Christ, death does not have the final say. “If we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him” (Rom 6:8; cf. 1 Thess 4:14).

It is only when Jesus comes again at the end of time that death will be definitively defeated. “The last enemy to be destroyed is death” (1 Cor 15:26). When that day comes, “death shall be no more” (Rev 21:4). “Then shall come to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is

thy sting?” (1 Cor 15:54–55)?

## The Day of Judgment

According to the “Glossary” of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, judgment is “the eternal retribution received by each soul at the moment of death, in accordance with that person’s faith and works.” Judgment is when Christ Himself decides whether our soul is fit for heaven or hell.

This definition applies specifically to the Particular Judgment: the judgment that every soul receives immediately upon death. There is also a Last Judgment that will coincide with the second coming of Christ.

Scripture is clear that the judge of all things is Jesus. “He is the one ordained by God to be judge of the living and the dead” (Acts 10:42; cf. 17:30–31; Rom 2:16; 1 Cor 5:10; 2 Tim 4:1). When Scripture speaks of judgment, it is usually either in reference to the punishment or rewards we receive in this life according to our fidelity to God, or in reference to the Particular Judgment at the end of time. But, there are also passages of the Particular Judgment as well. The clearest passage is from the Letter to the Hebrews:

“And how is it appointed for men to die once, and after that the judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him” (Heb 9:27–28).

Since no eternal reward can be received without judgment, the Particular Judgment is also implied in the passages that speak of receiving an eternal reward immediately upon death (cf. Lk 16:22; 23:43; Acts 1:25; 5:10; Phil 1:11).

For the Last Judgment, we may wonder why such a judgment is even necessary. Isn’t the Particular Judgment sufficient? Why do we have to be judged twice? There are at least three reasons for the Last Judgment.

First, it is the Last Judgment that will put a definitive end to all evil. All that is good will be separated from all that is evil, and then evil will be no more (cf. Is 11:6–9; Mt 13:49; Gal 1:4; 2 Tim 4:18; Rev 21:3–4). Secondly, this Judgment will serve to vindicate the justice and mercy of God. The works of every person will be made known to all (cf. Mt 10:26; Rom 2:16; 1 Cor 3:13; 4:5).

In this way, we will see why some merited heaven (by God’s grace) and others hell (by their decision to spurn

the grace available to all). We will finally come to understand why and how God’s plan unfolded in the life of every human being and in all of creation.

Finally, since the Judgment occurs after the Resurrection of the Body — when the human body of every person will come back to life — it serves the purpose of allowing us to experience heaven or hell as complete human persons. The righteous will receive glorified bodies of perfect immortality, and the unrighteous will receive bodies that will add physical pain to their spiritual torments (cf. Jn 5:29).

### “Let heaven rejoice and earth be glad”

As we have already seen in our discussion of death, if we die with and in Christ then we will live with Him forever. This eternal life with God is what we refer to as “heaven.” Scripture does not tell us a great deal about heaven. After all, “no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor 2:9). Still, there are a few things that we can know about it. Many commentators (including numerous Protestant scholars) believe that Jesus has this passage in mind when He says:

Once Adam and Eve sinned (of “falling”) committed the original sin, heaven was closed to man, as symbolized by their expulsion from the Garden of Eden as well as the angel placed there to guard the way to the Tree of Life (cf. Gen 3:24). As a result, all souls went to Hades (or, in Hebrew, “Sheol”) where they experienced comfort or torment depending on how they lived (cf. Job 21:13; Ps 9:17; 89:48; Is 38:10; Ezek 31:16; Lk 16:22–23).

When Jesus died, He descended into this “prison” (1 Pet 3:19) with “bars” (Job 17:16), preached the gospel to the righteous souls (cf. 1 Pet 3:19; 4:6) and led them out of Hades into heaven. “Therefore it is said, ‘When he ascended on high he led a host of captives’” (Eph 4:8).

This new abode of the righteous, where no unclean thing shall enter (cf. Rev 21:27; Heb 12:14), is now the promise and the hope of every Christian. “Here indeed we groan, and long to put on our heavenly dwelling” (2 Cor 5:2).

Why? For one, there are “treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal” (Mt 6:20). Heaven is a place of great rewards (cf. Mk 9:41; Lk 6:23; 1 Cor 3:12–15; Gal 6:9; 1 Pet 1:4), where we will reign with God in authority (cf. Lk 19:17–19; 22:30; 1 Cor 6:2–3; 2 Tim 2:12; Rev 2:26–28; 3:21; 22:5), and where we will find rest from this world’s many labors (cf. Heb 4:11; Rev 14:13). Heaven is a wedding feast where the saints will eat and

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