

General Judgment

(Judicium Universale, Last Judgment).

I. EXISTENCE OF THE GENERAL JUDGMENT

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Few truths are more often or more clearly proclaimed in Scripture than that of the general judgment. To it the prophets of the Old Testament refer when they speak of the "Day of the Lord" (Joel 2:31; Ezekiel 13:5; Isaiah 2:12), in which the nations will be summoned to judgment. In the New Testament the second Parusia, or coming of Christ as Judge of the world, is an oft-repeated doctrine. The Saviour Himself not only foretells the event but graphically portrays its circumstances (Matthew 24:27 sqq.; 25:31 sqq.). The Apostles give a most prominent place to this doctrine in their preaching (Acts 10:42; 17:31) and writings (Romans 2:5-16; 14:10; 1 Corinthians 4:5; 2 Corinthians 5:10; 2 Timothy 4:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:5; James 5:7). Besides the name Parusia (*parousia*), or Advent (1 Corinthians 15:23; 2 Thessalonians 2:19), the Second Coming is also called Epiphany, *epiphaneia*, or Appearance (2 Thessalonians 2:8; 1 Timothy 6:14; 2 Timothy 4:1; Titus 2:13), and Apocalypse (*apokalypsis*), or Revelation (2 Thessalonians 2:7; 1 Peter 4:13). The time of the Second Coming is spoken of as "that Day" (2 Timothy 4:8), "the day of the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 5:2), "the day of Christ" (Philemon 1:6), "the day of the Son of Man" (Luke 17:30), "the last day" (John 6:39-40).

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The belief in the general judgment has prevailed at all times and in all places within the Church. It is contained as an article of faith in all the ancient creeds: "He ascended into heaven. From thence He shall come to judge the living and the dead" (Apostles' Creed). He shall come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead" (Nicene Creed). "From thence he shall come to judge the living and the dead, at whose coming all men must rise with their bodies and are to render an account of their deeds" (Athanasian Creed). Relying on the authority of Papias, several Fathers of the first four centuries advanced the theory of a thousand years' terrestrial reign of Christ with the saints to precede the end of the World (*see article on MILLENNIUM*). Though this idea is interwoven with the eschatological teachings of those writers, it in no way detracted from their belief in a universal world-judgment. Patristic testimony to this dogma is clear and unanimous.

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The Roman Catechism thus explains why, besides the particular judgment of each individual, a general one should also be passed on the assembled world: "The first reason is founded on the circumstances that most augment the rewards or aggravate the punishments of the dead. Those who depart this life sometimes leave behind them children who imitate the conduct of their parents, descendants, followers; and others who adhere to and advocate the example, the language, the conduct of those on whom they depend, and whose example they follow; and as the good or bad influence or example, affecting as it does the conduct of many, is to terminate only with this world; justice demands that, in order to form a proper estimate of the good or bad actions of all, a general judgment should take place. . . . Finally, it was important to prove, that in prosperity and adversity, which are sometimes the promiscuous lot of the good and of the bad, everything is ordered by an all-wise, all-just, and all-ruling Providence: it was therefore necessary not only that rewards and punishments should await us in the next life but that they should be awarded by a public and general judgment."

II. SIGNS THAT ARE TO PRECEDE THE GENERAL JUDGMENT

The Scriptures mention certain events which are to take place before the final judgment. These predictions were not intended to serve as indications of the exact time of the judgment, for that day and hour are known only to the Father, and will come when least expected. They were meant to foreshadow the last judgment and

to keep the end of the world present to the minds of Christians, without, however, exciting useless curiosity and vain fears. Theologians usually enumerate the following nine events as signs of the last judgment:

1. General Preaching of the Christian Religion

Concerning this sign the Saviour says: "And this gospel of the kingdom, shall be preached in the whole world, for a testimony to all nations, and then shall the consummation come" (Matthew 24:14). This sign was understood by Chrysostom and Theophilus as referring to the destruction of Jerusalem, but, according to the majority of interpreters, Christ is here speaking of the end of the world.

2. Conversion of the Jews

According to the interpretation of the Fathers, the conversion of the Jews towards the end of the world is foretold by St. Paul in the Epistle to the Romans (11:25-26): "For I would not have you ignorant, brethren, of this mystery, . . . that blindness in part has happened in Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles should come in. And so all Israel should be saved as it is written: *There shall come out of Sion, he that shall deliver, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob*".

3. Return of Enoch and Elijah

The belief that these two men, who have never tasted death, are reserved for the last times to be precursors of the Second Advent was practically unanimous among the Fathers, which belief they base on several texts of Scripture. (Concerning Elijah see Malachi 4:5-6; Sirach 48:10; Matthew 17:11; concerning Enoch see Sirach 44:16)

4. A Great Apostasy

As to this event St. Paul admonishes the Thessalonians (2 Thessalonians 2:3) that they must not be terrified, as if the day of the Lord were at hand, for there must first come a revolt (*he apostasia*). The Fathers and interpreters understand by this revolt a great reduction in the number of the faithful through the abandonment of the Christian religion by many nations. Some commentators cite as confirmatory of this belief the words of Christ: "But yet the Son of man, when he cometh, shall he find, think you, faith on earth?" (Luke 18:8).

5. The Reign of Antichrist

In the passage above mentioned (2 Thessalonians 2:3 sqq.) St. Paul indicates as another sign of the day of the Lord, the revelation of the man of sin, the son of perdition. "The man of sin" here described is generally identified with the Antichrist, who, says St. John (1 John 2:18), is to come in the last days. Although much obscurity and difference of opinion prevails on this subject, it is generally admitted from the foregoing and other texts that before the Second Coming there will arise a powerful adversary of Christ, who will seduce the nations by his wonders, and persecute the Church.

6. Extraordinary Perturbations of Nature

The Scriptures clearly indicate that the judgment will be preceded by unwonted and terrifying disturbances of the physical universe (Matthew 24:29; Luke 21:25-26). The wars, pestilences, famines, and earthquakes foretold in Matthew 24:6 sq., are also understood by some writers as among the calamities of the last times.

7. The Universal Conflagration

In the Apostolic writings we are told that the end of the world will be brought about through a general conflagration, which, however, will not annihilate the present creation, but will change its form and appearance (2 Peter 3:10-13; cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:2; Apocalypse 3:3, and 16:15). Natural science shows the possibility of such a catastrophe being produced in the ordinary course of events, but theologians generally tend to believe that its origin will be entirely miraculous.

8. The Trumpet of Resurrection

Several texts in the New Testament make mention of a voice or trumpet which will awaken the dead to resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:52; 1 Thessalonians 4:15; John 5:28). According to St. Thomas (Supplement 86:2) there is reference in these passages either to the voice or to the apparition of Christ, which will cause the resurrection of the dead.

9. "The Sign of the Son of Man Appearing in the Heavens."

In Matthew 24:30, this is indicated as the sign immediately preceding the appearance of Christ to judge the world. By this sign the Fathers of the Church generally understand the appearance in the sky of the Cross on which the Saviour died or else of a wonderful cross of light.

III. CIRCUMSTANCES ACCOMPANYING THE GENERAL JUDGMENT

1. Time

As was stated above, the signs that are to precede the judgment give no accurate indication of the time when it will occur (Mark 13:32). When the Disciples asked the Saviour: "Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" He answered: "It is not for you to know the times or moments, which the Father hath put in his own power" (Acts 1:6-7). The uncertainty of the day of judgment is continually urged by Christ and the Apostles as an incentive to vigilance. The day of the Lord will come "as a thief" (Matthew 24:42-43), like lightning suddenly appearing (Matthew 24:27), like a snare (Luke 21:34), as the Deluge (Matthew 24:37).

2. Place of the Judgment

All the texts in which mention is made of the Parusia, or Second Coming, seem to imply clearly enough that the general judgment will take place on the earth. Some commentators infer from 1 Thessalonians 4:16, that the judgment will be held in the air, the newly risen being carried into the clouds to meet Christ; according to others the prophecy of Joel (3:1 sq.) places the last judgment in the Valley of Josaphat.

3. The Coming of the Judge

That this judgment is ascribed to Christ, not only as God, but also as Man, is expressly declared in Scripture; for although the power of judging is common to all the Persons of the Trinity, yet it is specially attributed to the Son, because to Him also in a special manner is ascribed wisdom. But that as Man He will judge the world is confirmed by Christ Himself (John 5:26-27). At the Second Coming Christ will appear in the heavens, seated on a cloud and surrounded by the angelic hosts (Matthew 16:27; 24:30; 25:31). The angels will minister to the Judge by bringing all before Him (Matthew 24:31). The elect will aid Christ in a judicial capacity (1 Corinthians 6:2). The lives of the just will in themselves be a condemnation of the wicked (Matthew 21:41), whose punishment they will publicly approve. But the Apostles will be judges of the world in a sense yet more exact, for the promise that they shall sit upon twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Matthew 19:28) seems to imply a real participation in judicial authority. According to a very probable opinion, this prerogative is extended to all who have faithfully fulfilled the counsels of the Gospel (Matthew 19:27-28). Nothing certain is known as to the manner in which this delegated authority will be exercised. St. Thomas conjectures that the greater saints will make known the sentence of Christ to others (Supplement 88:2).

4. Those to be Judged

All men, both good and bad, according to the Athanasian Creed, will appear in the judgment to give an account of their deeds. As to children that have personally done neither good nor evil, the baptized must be distinguished from the unbaptized. The former appear in the judgment, not to be judged, but only to hold the

glory of Christ (Supplement 80:5), while the latter, ranked with the wicked, although not judged, will be enabled to realize the justice of their eternal loss (Suarez). The angels and the demons will not be judged directly, since their eternal destiny has already been fixed; yet, because they have exercised a certain influence over the fortunes of men, the sentence pronounced on the latter will have a corresponding effect on them also (Supplement 89:8).

5. Object of the Judgment

The judgment will embrace all works, good or bad, forgiven as well as forgiven sins, every idle word (Matthew 12:36), every secret thought (1 Corinthians 4:5). With the exception of Peter Lombard, theologians teach that even the secret sins of the just will be made manifest, in order that judgment may be made complete and that the justice and mercy of God may be glorified. This will not pain or embarrass the saints, but add to their glory, just as the repentance of St. Peter and St. Mary Magdalen is to these saints a source of joy and honour.

6. Form of the Judgment

The procedure of the judgment is described in Matthew 25:31-46, and in the Apocalypse 20:12. Commentators see in those passages allegorical descriptions intended to convey in a vivid manner the fact that in the last judgment the conduct and deserts of each individual will be made plain not only to his own conscience but to the knowledge of the assembled world. It is probable that no words will be spoken in the judgment, but that in one instant, through a Divine illumination, each creature will thoroughly understand his own moral condition and that of every fellow creature (Romans 2:15). Many believe, however, that the words of the sentence: "Come, ye blessed", etc. and "Depart from me", etc. will be really addressed by Christ to the multitude of the saved and the lost.

IV. RESULTS OF THE GENERAL JUDGMENT

With the fulfilment of the sentence pronounced in the last judgment the relations and the dealings of the Creator with the creature find their culmination, are explained and justified. The Divine purpose being accomplished, the human race will, as a consequence, attain its final destiny. The reign of Christ over mankind will be the sequel of the General Judgment.

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