



July 26, 2008

Two Groups of People

The Bible insists that at the end of time on planet Earth there will be only two groups of people. The first group accepts Christ's gift of eternal salvation, choosing to spend eternity with Jesus. The second group would rather perish in the Lake of Fire. The same Bible that promises us that an innumerable host "from every nation, tribe, people and language" will be eternally saved (Revelation 7:9) also reveals that another host, as numerous as the "sand on the seashore" (20:8) will refuse salvation.

The biblical contrast between the two groups is stark: wise and foolish (Matthew 25:2), sheep and goats (25:31-33). Good fish and bad fish, the righteous and the wicked (13:47-50). The children of light and the children of darkness (Ephesians 5:8). Those who follow the Lamb wherever He goes (Revelation 14:4) and those who make war against the Lamb (17:14). Those "whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life" (21:27) and those whose names are "blotted out" (3:5).

In which of the two groups do we stand this morning? Can we be sure? Is it permitted to be convinced and assured? Or must we be as uncertain of God's love for us as Leah was of Jacob's love? Must we go through life here on earth, trying to be good enough ("I'll work for you for seven years," we say, "in return for the reward"), and wondering all the time if we've convinced the Judge? "Surely he will love me now." "Now at last he will become attached to me." "This time he will treat me with honor."

There is an End

The Bible's assurance concerning eternity begins with the calming promise that there is an end to the present world. "The oppressor will come to an end, and destruction will cease; the aggressor will vanish from the land. In love a throne will be established" (Isaiah 1:4, 5). "This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matthew 24:14).

No matter how we refer to that day – the Second Coming, the end of the age, the day of the Lord – the Bible's position is resolute: There is an end! "Our God shall come, and shall not keep silence" (Psalm 50:3). "I will return" (Zechariah 8:3). "I will come back" (John 14:1-3). "This same Jesus... will come back" (Acts 1:11). "I am coming soon" (Revelation 22:20). "The trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed" (1 Corinthians 15:52). "The Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the

trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words” (1Thessalonians 4:16-18).

On that long-anticipated day, to the accompaniment of trumpets and thunder and lightning, we will hear just those two distinct voices reacting to the return of Jesus.

One voice proclaims with confidence, “Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the Lord, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation” (Isaiah 25:9). “The Lord is our judge, the Lord is our lawgiver, the Lord is our king; it is he who will save us” (33:22). “Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come” (Revelation 19:6, 7).

The second voice, just as loud and just as distinct, is a fearful cry. “Listen!” the prophet Zephaniah summons us. “The cry on the day of the Lord will be bitter, the shouting of the warrior there. That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom” (Zephaniah 1:14, 15). “Wail, for the day of the Lord is near,” Isaiah adds (Isaiah 13:4-6). Ezekiel paints that day as a day of doom (Ezekiel 30:3). Joel calls it “dreadful” (Joel 2:11). Amos describes it as a day of darkness without a ray of brightness (Amos 5:20). Jesus says that people will mourn (Matthew 24:30), and speaks of the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (13:50). John hears people saying to the rocks and mountains, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne” (Revelation 6:16).

Two groups of people. Two voices: one, full of confidence, trust, joy, and gladness. The other voice is a fearful, mournful wail, a bitter, stressed, and gloomy cry. What makes the difference?

Here’s the answer: The confident group has done their crying earlier. Listen to this explanation from the 107th Psalm: “They cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress” (Psalm 107:6). They had wandered in desert wastelands (v. 4). They had been hungry and thirsty (v. 5). They had sat in darkness and the deepest gloom (v. 10). They had rebelled against the words of God and despised the counsel of the Most High (v. 11, 17). Their courage had failed (v. 26). They “reeled and staggered like drunken men; they were at their wits’ end” (v. 27). They had been humbled (v. 39).

And in those earlier, humbling times of trouble, as they struggled with their commitment, as they grappled with the temptation to be confident in themselves rather than in God, as they wrestled with despair, they discovered God's saving power. He breaks away our chains (v. 14). He heals and rescues us (v. 20). He stills our storms to a calming whisper (v. 29, 30). He turns parched ground into flowing springs (v. 35).

Now the confident ones "see and rejoice" (v. 42), and express their gratitude to God "for his unfailing love" (v. 8, 15, 21, 31). "Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever. Let the redeemed of the Lord say so" (v. 1, 2, New King James Version). "Whoever is wise, let him heed these things and consider the great love of the Lord" (v. 43).

There is a Judgment

First, the Bible assures us that there is an end. Second, the Bible makes it clear that there is a judgment.

"The Lord will judge the ends of the earth," Hannah prays (1 Samuel 2:10). "The Lord will bring charges against the nations," Jeremiah agrees; "He will bring judgment on all mankind" (Jeremiah 25:31). "He has set a day when he will judge the world," Paul preaches in Athens (Acts 17:31). "We will all stand before God's judgment seat" (Romans 14:10).

Many of us grew up dreading the Judgment Day, hoping it wouldn't happen anytime soon, and pretending that if we didn't think too much about it, maybe the subject would just go away. Someone drew the connecting lines for us, or we intuitively connected by ourselves the public end-time judgment with a long list of private, personal transgressions, and the conviction grew that one day everyone in the world would know exactly how rebellious we really had been.

"The judgment was set, and the books were opened: (Daniel 7:10). "God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil" (Ecclesiastes 12:8). "Men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken" (Matthew 12:36). "The books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books" (Revelation 20:12).

Yet the Bible presents a startling picture of the judgment, exactly as it presents the picture of the end of time, with only two groups alive to react.

While the judgment is feared by the wicked, by evildoers, by those who are afraid to look into the face of the righteous Judge, it is not feared at all by those who trust God. For people whose confidence is in the Lord and whose life is in His hands, the judgment holds no dread, no fear, and no worries. “Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be shaken” (Psalm 125:1). “You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you. Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord, the Lord, is the Rock eternal” (Isaiah 26:3, 4). “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment” (1 John 4:16-18).

So we are encouraged to look forward to the time of judgment, to trust in the righteous decisions of an all-knowing God whose love, goodness, faithfulness, and righteousness endure forever (1 Chronicles 16:34; Psalm 100:5; 117:2; 112:3).

“Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is in it; let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them. Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy; they will sing before the Lord, for he comes, he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in his truth” (Psalm 96:11-13). “Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy; let them sing before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity” (Psalm 98:8, 9).

So let the stories be told about the good fish and the bad fish, the sheep and the goats, the wise and the foolish. The Bible assures us of our eternal home and asks us to be confident. “Nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39). In Him “we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace” (1:7). “God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life” (1 John 5:11, 12). “Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith... Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful” (Hebrews 10:22, 23).

