

The Hymns We Sing
Sermons on the Great Hymns
When This Passing World is Done

With Study Questions

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When This Passing World is Done

Romans 8:12

The words of this hymn were written in 1837 by Robert M. McCheyne. The theme of this hymn is coming to recognize the debt incurred by our sin, the price paid for our sin and what our response to this ought to be.

*When this passing world is done,
When has sunk yon glaring sun,
When we stand with Christ in glory,
Looking o'er life's finished story,
Then, Lord, shall I fully know –
Not till then – how much I owe.*

Why Mention Judgment?

The end of the world is no mere fantasy. It is no wonder that many think it a myth since judgment day is generally associated with street-side imbeciles carrying body placards or televangelists and novelists who turn the event into a sideshow for profit. This type of folly has caused the world, and many Christians, to disregard the importance and emphasis given to this day in Scripture. Let us ask ourselves, “what is the purpose of the mention of judgment day in Scripture?” But before we do that, let us acquaint ourselves with the great and terrible day of the Lord. First, from Revelation 20 and 21 we read,

The Great and Terrible Day

Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. ¹²And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is *the Book of Life*. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. ¹³ The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. ¹⁴ Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. ¹⁵ And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire. ²¹ Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. ² Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as

a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God *is* with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them *and be* their God. ⁴And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away." ⁵ Then He who sat on the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new." And He said to me, "Write, for these words are true and faithful" (Revelation 20:11- 21:5).

A Worse Death

John was called to write these true and faithful words for this event will surely come to pass. At the consummation of history the dead will be raised and stand before the great white throne to receive the due and final penalty for their sins. In the strongest language available to John he writes of those who are judged according to their works, that they will be cast into a lake of fire. This is the second death.

The fear of the first death will pale in comparison to the nightmare of the second death; for those who have died sinful and faithless can delude themselves into thinking that they have merely reached the end of their time. But at the second death, there is full awareness of eternal torment. And in the off chance that one might consider it unloving to bring the horror of this second death to the forefront of our conversation, let him critique the Savior Himself who said,

"But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea. ⁴³ If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched — ⁴⁴ where *'Their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.'* ⁴⁵ And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame, rather than having two feet, to be cast into hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched — ⁴⁶ where *'Their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.'* ⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire — ⁴⁸ where *'Their worm does not die And the fire is not quenched'*" (Mark 9:42-48).

What We Will Know

To doubt, or de-emphasize hell and judgment day is to doubt, and diminish, the words of Christ Himself. One day this world will cease to exist

as we currently know it, the sun itself will be replaced by the light of God (Revelation 22:5). On that day, those who are in Christ will stand with Him in glory. And when the books are opened and all is laid bare, we shall come to know in full what we now merely know in part. We will fully know the depth of human depravity and the consequences thereof – we will fully know the deliverance and the deliverer – we will fully know from what we have been saved.

But let us not think that since we only know in part now, that that part should remain only a small part. It is neither healthy for the unbeliever nor the believer to ignore the pending judgment of God.

McCheyne, following the pattern of Scripture, continues to emphasize the judgment of God.

*When I hear the wicked call,
On the rocks and hills to fall,
When I see them start and shrink
On the fiery deluge brink,
Then, Lord, shall I fully know –
Not till then – how much I owe.*

The words of these stanzas are taken from the sixth chapter of Revelation.

I looked when He opened the sixth seal, and behold, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became like blood. ¹³And the stars of heaven fell to the earth, as a fig tree drops its late figs when it is shaken by a mighty wind. ¹⁴ Then the sky receded as a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island was moved out of its place. ¹⁵And the kings of the earth, the great men, the rich men, the commanders, the mighty men, every slave and every free man, hid themselves in the caves and in the rocks of the mountains, ¹⁶ and said to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! ¹⁷ For the great day of His wrath has come, and who is able to stand?” (Revelation 6:12-17)

Buried Alive

Though this may very well be a judgment in history rather than eternity, it is worth noting that being buried alive (often the subject of nightmares) is preferred to the wrath of the Lamb.

Knowledge by Contrast

So the first stanza of this hymn reveals to us the coming of a day of the Lord when all the books will be opened and we will stand with Christ in glory. We will then begin to more fully understand our debt to God; the hymn crescendos into the second stanza when the understanding of our debt before God becomes more apparent. Viewing the judgment of the wicked illumines us regarding our own deliverance – deliverance from the wrath of the Lamb. The words of Paul in the ninth chapter of Romans reinforce this thought.

What if God, wanting to show *His* wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction,²³ and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory? (Romans 9:22, 23)

Calvin comments that it is

...in the destruction of the reprobate [that] the greatness of divine mercy toward the elect is hereby more clearly made known; for how do they differ from them except that they are delivered by the Lord from the same gulf of destruction? and this by no merit of their own, but through his gratuitous kindness.”¹

One Reason--Grace

In a recent debate this was brought to the forefront of the discussion when the Reformed contestant gave an account of judgment day when the damned stands upon the parapets of the flickering flames of hell screaming his profanities at God. There will be an equally blazing reality brought to the minds of those who stand with Christ in glory that the only reason they are not screaming the same curses from the same place of torment is found in one word, grace; thus bringing us to our next stanza.

*When I stand before the throne,
Dressed in beauty not my own,
When I see Thee as Thou art,
Love Thee with unsinning heart,
Then Lord, shall I fully know –
Not till then – how much I owe.*

¹ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries, Romans* (Baker Book House, reprint 1993), p. 369.

An Imputed Beauty

The Christian must recognize, and continue to recognize that our beauty before God is an imputed beauty – the beauty of Christ freely given. We are dressed in a beauty not our own. Paul writes to the Galatians, **“For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Galatians 3:27 NASB).**

Paul uses the clothing metaphor in his second letter to the church at Corinth,

For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven, ³ if indeed, having been clothed, we shall not be found naked. ⁴ For we who are in *this* tent groan, being burdened, not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed, that mortality may be swallowed up by life. ⁵ Now He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who also has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. (2 Corinthians 5:2-5).

Perhaps, in more prophetic fashion, we see the re-clothing of a sinner in the Old Testament book of Zechariah.

Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the Angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to oppose him. ²And the Lord said to Satan, “The Lord rebuke you, Satan! The Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! *Is this not a brand plucked from the fire?*” ³ Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments, and was standing before the Angel. ⁴ Then He answered and spoke to those who stood before Him, saying, “Take away the filthy garments from him.” And to him He said, “See, I have removed your iniquity from you, and I will clothe you with rich robes.” ⁵And I said, “Let them put a clean turban on his head.” So they put a clean turban on his head, and they put the clothes on him. And the Angel of the Lord stood by (Zechariah 3:1-5).

Dressed by Christ

Satan ever accuses and the Lord ever intercedes on our behalf. But we are not defended on the basis of our own innocence. Christ, our advocate, is no mere shrewd attorney who knows how to manipulate the law and naïve jurors. We are defended on the basis of having been re-clothed in Christ. Notice well that the re-clothing of Joshua was not his own doing. He merely stood while his filthy garments were taken from him and rich robes were put on him – thus

symbolizing the removal of his iniquity by the grace and power of another. When we say we are dressed in beauty not our own, the “dressed” is also a verb. We do not dress ourselves in the beauty but are dressed by Christ; this thought being unique to a biblical and reformed understanding of grace.

Jesus also uses the clothing metaphor in the parable of the wedding feast.

“But when the king came in to see the guests, he saw a man there who did not have on a wedding garment. ¹² So he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you come in here without a wedding garment?’ And he was speechless. ¹³ Then the king said to the servants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, take him away, and cast *him* into outer darkness; there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”
(Matthew 22:11-13).

Double Imputation

Before we move on, let us not lose the depth of the clothing illustration. To be clothed in Christ means that His sinless perfection is granted us; but it also means that all the horror and hell we spoke of earlier was something that Christ wore for us. The imputation is a double imputation. As Paul writes, **“For He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him”** (2 Corinthians 5:21). We can only be dressed in His beauty because He dressed Himself in our corruption.

Full Knowledge

Consider my friends that in this state of glory we will have an unadulterated understanding of the manifold grace of God along with a heart unfettered by sin. We will grasp this notion in its fullness. It is little wonder that the Apostle Paul wraps up his great love chapter (1 Corinthians 13) with the idea of “knowing,”

When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. ¹² For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known (1 Corinthians 13:11, 12).

We will know, more fully, the judgment we deserved, we will know, more fully, the Savior who has delivered us from this judgment and how that deliverance took place. My lack of love for God is generally an embarrassment to me. Our ability to love God with an unsinning heart will be both an eternal joy for us and eternally glorious to God.

*Chosen not for good in me,
Wakened up from wrath to flee,
Hidden in the Savior's side,
By the Spirit sanctified,
Teach me, Lord, on earth to show,
By my love, how much I owe.*

Unconditional Election

McCheyne seizes here the Pauline doctrine of unconditional election.

Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner, but share with me in the sufferings for the gospel according to the power of God,⁹ who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began (2 Timothy 1:8, 9).

We are not saved according to our works. This popular concept robs God of His glory in salvation. I call this popular for it is not uncommon today (and throughout the history of the church) for people to think they have somehow contributed to their own salvation – helped clothed themselves. They might say that they didn't clothe themselves, but merely allowed themselves to be clothed. However you wish to slice it, it inevitably results in their cooperative will that puts the final touches on their salvation.

Waiting For Faith

This is cunningly portrayed as our faith being the action for which God longingly waits. They argue that faith is not a work. But one need not read too far in any book in the Bible before it becomes explosively apparent that we are commanded to have faith. One need not be a logician to draw the connection that if God commands something, the response to that command is a work.

Certainly God commands us to have faith, but then graciously provides for us the certain ability to obey what He has commanded. Faith itself is then the gift of God through which we are saved. To rob this from God is to rob from God the glory of being the Savior.

Spirit Justified, Sanctifies – Living As Debtors

It is the Spirit of God that grants us the faith that both justifies us, then sanctifies us. The hymn ends with a prayer that God will grants us the ability to show now, on earth, that we realize how much we owe God. With this as

the backdrop of our thinking we are to live as debtors. Paul makes this clear in Romans 12, **“Therefore, brethren, we are debtors – not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh” (Romans 12:12)**. Paul viewed himself as being in debt to all. **“I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to wise and to unwise.”** And Paul viewed his payment (not that he could truly pay back God) as his willingness to preach the gospel. **“¹⁵ So, as much as is in me, I am ready to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome also” (Romans 1:14, 15).**

Why Mention Judgment?

So what is the answer to the question posed at the beginning of this message “what is the purpose of the mention of judgment day in Scripture?”

First that God may be glorified for both His judgments and His mercy. Second, that the unbeliever may be converted and that the believers persevere. And finally, as McCheyne points out, that we might show on earth that we recognize our debt to God by properly loving others.

This comes to light when we examine the “therefores” which attend the mentioning of judgment day in Scripture.²

Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name,¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.¹¹ For it is written: “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall confess to God.”¹² So then each of us shall give account of himself to God.¹³ Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother’s way (Romans 14:9-13).

Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name,¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth,¹¹ and *that* every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ *is* Lord, to the glory of God the Father.¹² Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling;¹³ for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for *His* good pleasure.¹⁴ Do all things without complaining and disputing,¹⁵ that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in

² Some of these judgments are in eternity, some in history; the purpose of them being mentioned is, however, similar.

the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world,¹⁶ holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain (Philippians 2:11-16).

These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power,¹⁰ when He comes, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed.¹¹ Therefore we also pray always for you that our God would count you worthy of *this* calling, and fulfill all the good pleasure of *His* goodness and the work of faith with power,¹² that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Thessalonians 1:9-12).

But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up.¹¹ Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of *persons* ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness,¹² looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat?¹³ Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells (2 Peter 3:10-13).

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all.¹⁴ For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil (Ecclesiastes 12:13, 14).

The mentioning of judgment, and the escape from judgment, is almost always attended by a call on the person's life to live in a manner consistent with this great revelation and deliverance. We are to live a life of continual gratitude for what God has done for us and this gratitude is to be manifested by our gracious behavior toward others.

When we sing this hymn we are acknowledging a day of reckoning before God. We are acknowledging that that day will be both great and terrible. We are acknowledging that for the believer it will be glorious because of God's grace and His grace alone. And finally, we are praying that God will grant us the grace to live a life that reflects these glorious truths.

Questions for Study

1. What is the second death and why is it worse than the first death (page 3)?
2. Is it unkind to mention hell and judgment? Explain your answer (pages 3, 4)?
3. How does the judgment of the wicked help believers worship God (page 5)?
4. What is the reason Christians will not be in eternal torment, crying out curses to God (page 5)?
5. Discuss the idea of imputed beauty (pages 5, 6).
6. What does it mean to be clothed in Christ (pages 6, 7)?
7. What is double imputation (page 7)?
8. What will the full knowledge of deliverance evoke in the Christian in eternity (page 7)?
9. What is unconditional election (page 8)?
10. Does God idly stand by and wait for us to contribute faith to our salvation (page 8)?
11. What does the prayer at the end of the hymn petition God for (pages 8, 9)?
12. What are some reasons judgment is mentioned in Scripture (pages 9, 10)?