

Right Now Counts Forever

Ecclesiastes Part 17
Ecclesiastes 12:14 4-6-2014

Summary: Summary of Ecclesiastes: Expect and Enjoy (by fearing God). He never shows us the afterlife, but does end the book by pointing to the door to eternity: the Judgment. It is a neglected, despised doctrine, but Scripture is very clear and emphatic. All will be judged and will receive one of only two possible verdicts: saved or lost. Next comes the sentencing phase where the wicked will be punished according to their deeds and the righteous will be rewarded according to theirs. But the righteous will also be held accountable for their sins.

Introduction.....	1
Summary of Ecclesiastes	1
Stop trying to gain control of life.	2
1. Just use wisdom and then trust God with the things that are outside of your control.	2
2. Realize that enjoyment comes not from God's gifts, but from God Himself, through His gifts.	2
3. Be alert to every instance where God is making that gift of enjoyment available through one of His gifts.	2
4. But when you do so, be very careful to enjoy those things the right way.	2
Expect the world to be fallen and broken and trust God with that.	2
Enjoy what can be enjoyed in life by using wisdom, fearing God, and living for His pleasure.	2
Judgment Day.....	2
A Neglected Doctrine	2
A Despised Doctrine	3
The Verdict	3
The Sentencing	3
Reward	4
The Nature of the Rewards	4
Willingness	4
Accountability	5
Shame	6
Loss	6
Rewards Matter	7
Content to Be a Janitor in Heaven?	7
Questions.....	8
When Will Judgment Day Happen?	8
Does Confession Matter on Judgment Day?	8
What about Forgiveness?	9
Should We Look Forward to This Day or Dread It?10	
Conclusion: Everything Matters.....	10
Application Questions (James 1:25)	11

Ecclesiastes 12:13 When all has been heard, the conclusion of the matter is: fear God and keep His commands, because this is for all humanity. 14 For God will bring every act to judgment, including every hidden thing, whether good or evil.

Introduction

Summary of Ecclesiastes

After 16 weeks studying the book of Ecclesiastes, do you feel like you have a handle on the message of the book? Let me give you a quick summary. At the end of every section of this book he gives us the exact same conclusion: enjoy life. The purpose of Ecclesiastes is to get us to enjoy life. The problem is, this life is futile. We live in a fallen, cursed, futile world where horrible things happen all the time. So how can you possibly enjoy life in an environment like that?

1. *Stop trying to gain control of life. Just use wisdom and then trust God with the things that are outside of your control.*
2. *Realize that enjoyment comes not from God's gifts, but from God Himself, through His gifts.*
3. *Be alert to every instance where God is making that gift of enjoyment available through one of His gifts.*
4. *But when you do so, be very careful to enjoy those things the right way.*

What is the right way? Enjoy them by living for God's pleasure, and fearing His displeasure. That is the way to enjoy life in a futile, fallen, cursed world. So to put it even more succinctly, two E's: Expect and Enjoy.

Expect the world to be fallen and broken and trust God with that.

Enjoy what can be enjoyed in life by using wisdom, fearing God, and living for His pleasure.

That is the message of Ecclesiastes. And if it has seemed to you like there has been an imbalance – too much emphasis on enjoying life and not enough emphasis on fearing and obeying God, he balances that back out at the very end, where he gives us the bottom line. In the closing paragraph he says, “Here’s the sum of the whole matter...” and he does not even mention enjoyment of life. He only mentions fearing and obeying God because of the certainty of Judgment Day.

Ecclesiastes 12:13 When all has been heard, the conclusion of the matter is: fear God and keep His commands, because this is the whole of humanity. 14 For God will bring every act to judgment, including every hidden thing, whether good or evil.

Fear and obey God because right now counts forever. Ecclesiastes is a book about this life – life under the sun - here and now. He never gives us a glimpse of the afterlife. The closest he comes is here at the very end when he shows us the doorway to eternity, which is Judgment Day.¹

Judgment Day

What I would like to do today is open that door. When I put this passage before you last week, it raised some questions, like, “How can God judge us for sins that are forgiven? And how can there be any kind of sorrow on the day that we finally meet our Savior face to face? Should we be dreading that day or looking forward to it? And when God judges us, what will the criteria be? What kind of Christian will do well on that Day and what kind will not do so well?”

A Neglected Doctrine

There is a huge amount of confusion on those questions, because preachers so rarely teach on this topic. How often do you ever turn on the radio and hear a sermon on Judgment Day? If you went into Family Christian bookstore tomorrow and asked for a book about Judgment Day, I doubt there would be a single one on the shelves. In the article on Judgment Day in the Anchor Bible Dictionary the author points

¹ Some say that Solomon is referring only to judgment that will take place in this life, not a future judgment. I disagree because all through the book he has been making the point that injustice dominates life under the sun. That is part of living in a fallen, cursed world. Things won't be made right until the final judgment on the last Day. The concept of judgment from God is mentioned very, very frequently in the Old Testament, and in many cases it is talking about judgment in this life - punishment and reward in this life. But not always. There are several Old Testament passages that point to a future, final judgment. For example, **Psalm 96:13 the LORD ... is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with His faithfulness.** That is talking about the future.

out that very little scholarly work has been done on this topic. Scholars shy away from it, pastors shy away from it, and so it is no wonder that people don't know much about it.

Why is that? Some doctrines are hard because there are only a few obscure references in the Bible and we are not sure what they mean. But that is not the case with the doctrine of Judgment Day. Scripture is *packed* with information about the Judgment, and it is really pretty straightforward. I think I studied about 60 or 70 different passages that directly teach on Judgment Day just in the New Testament. Compare that to the doctrine of the rapture, which is mentioned in only two or three passages. And yet there are probably 100 books on the Rapture for every one book on Judgment Day.

A Despised Doctrine

The reason there is so much confusion is because in so many cases the church has just simply chosen to ignore this doctrine. Why? Why are scholars and pastors alike so squeamish about this topic? Do you think it has something to do with the fact that we live in a culture that hates the concept of judgment and despises anyone who talks about it? Nothing will make you more unpopular in this culture than talking about judgment as being a good thing.

This world hates the idea of judgment, which is ironic, because their other big complaint against God is that He allows evil.

“How could there be a loving, powerful God if there is so much evil in the world? Why would He just allow evil to continue to exist?”

Then when God promises that someday He will judge and punish all evil they say, “Oh, that's just barbaric. How could a loving God do that?” If judgment is really such a horrible thing, why are they so quick to pass judgment on God? The fact is, they love judgment; just not God's judgment. They love passing judgment – they just don't want judgment passed on them. But it will be. Every human being who has ever lived will be judged. Right now counts forever.

The Verdict

And there will be two stages of the judgment. First, God will render a verdict on each person. And there are only two possible verdicts: saved or lost. Revelation 20 is very clear – the Lamb's Book of Life will be opened, and if your name is not written there, you will be found guilty for all your sins. If your name is written there, you will be forgiven for all your sins and will be welcomed into heaven. The section of my sermon on that was an entire sermon in itself, so that is going to have to wait for a future message. But for today I would like to skip over that and focus on the second phase of Judgment Day – the sentencing phase.

The Sentencing

This is the part where there is the most confusion. Many Christians seem to believe Judgment Day is over after the verdicts are rendered. But there is more to it than that. After it is determined who is saved and who is lost, then each man and woman will actually receive what is due him or her for the deeds done in their lifetime.

If your name is not written in the Book, you will be cast into the lake of fire where you will be tormented day and night forever. Some will be tormented more severely than others based on the amount of light they were given, but every last one will suffer forever in the lake of fire. But what if your name is there? How does the sentencing phase go for believers?

Reward

For us the sentencing phase will be for the purpose of determining our eternal rewards. That is how Judgment Day will be announced:

Revelation 11:18 ... The time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding ... your saints and those who reverence your name, both small and great

Right now counts forever. Some of you have been taught that we should not have reward as a motive for serving God. That is the exact opposite of what Jesus taught. Read Matthew 6. Jesus commanded us to store up for ourselves treasure in heaven.

The Nature of the Rewards

And those rewards will make you happier than the most wonderful thing you have ever experienced in your lifetime. Matthew 25:21 says you will be invited to share in the very happiness of God!

1 Corinthians 4:5 says on that day you will receive praise from God! If God says to you, “Well done, good and faithful servant,” that will be the greatest feeling of acceptance and affirmation you will have ever experienced up to that point in your whole life. It will be something you would not trade for all the pleasures of all the sins in the whole wide world. Luke 14:14 says God will compensate you for whatever obedience to Him cost you in this life. You will be rewarded with great responsibilities in heaven.

Luke 19:17 'Well done, my good servant!' his master replied. 'Because you have been trustworthy in a very small matter, take charge of ten cities.'

You will be rewarded with responsibility in whatever area God created you to thrive, and that will bring you greater fulfillment than you have ever experienced in your life. Right now counts forever.

Willingness

The Lord will reward you even for things you were willing to do but did not get the chance! I think of a woman who really has a heart to give to the Lord and support ministries financially, but her husband won't allow it.

2 Corinthians 8:12 For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable

On Judgment Day you will be rewarded for things you never even did but would have done if you had the chance. A big, giant, spectacular, thrilling reward from God, and you will say, “Wow! What is this one for?” And He will say, “For giving up your blanket in a cold prison cell to keep a fellow prisoner warm.”

“What? I was never in prison.”

“I know, but I looked in your heart during one period in your life and saw that if you would have been in prison, you would have given up your blanket. And if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable.” David was not able to build God a temple, but God commended him for wanting to.

Did you know you will be rewarded for prayer? Every time you pray with good motives – not to impress people, but to actually talk to God, you are accruing reward (Mt.6:6).

“I'm not really the type who can ever do anything really great.”

Let me ask you this – could you encourage or support someone who is doing something great? In Matthew 10:41 Jesus said if you welcome or support a prophet or righteous man, you will receive their reward.

You can accumulate reward just by enduring suffering in a godly way (1 Pe.2:19). You will be rewarded for doing your work as unto the Lord (Col.3:22-24).

It will be a day of reward – and also a day of vindication and making all wrongs right.²

² 2 Thes.1:5-10, 1 Pe.2:23, Rev.6:10, 11:8, 19:1-3.

Accountability

When God opens His books, under your name will be two lists. One list is sins. But there will also be a long list of Christ-glorifying deeds done through faith in Jesus by the power of the Spirit. And that list will first be used to show God's justice in welcoming you into heaven, and then it will be used again for determining your level of reward. But what about the other list? What about your sins? Will they matter on that Day? Yes.

Romans 14:10 ... we will all stand before God's judgment seat. ... 12 So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.³

That is not talking about your good deeds. Every time you see the idea of giving an account in the Bible, it is always in the context of giving an explanation for something that went wrong. Nobody ever says, "Ok, give me an explanation for why you did the right thing!"⁴ If you disobey God, you will be held accountable. Right now counts forever.

2 Corinthians 5:9 So we make it our goal to please him...

Why Paul? Why do you make it your goal to please Him?

10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

Paul made it his goal to please Christ because he knew someday he would have to stand before Christ and give an account for all his deeds – including the bad ones. Some have tried to say that the word translated **bad** does not really refer to evil things – just worthless things. But it is the exact same word used in in John 5.

John 5:29 those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.

That word **evil** is this same word. It refers to the kinds of things unbelievers will be sent to hell for – real, moral evil. We will not be sent to hell for the evil in our lives, but we will have to give an account for it. Right now counts forever. Paul made it his goal to please Christ in everything he did because he did not want to have to give an account for a bunch of displeasing deeds on Judgment Day. His fear of that was so profound that it was the thing that motivated him to go to such extremes in winning the lost.

2 Corinthians 5:10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad. 11 Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men.

It is important to see the connection between verse 10 and verse 11. He is talking about the fact that he is going to have to stand before the judgment seat of Christ, and he draws two conclusions: 1) I'd better make it my goal to please Him, and 2) I'd better get out there and rescue as many people as possible from God's wrath on Judgment Day. If it is this scary to think of just giving an account when my

³ Paul is speaking to believers here – weaker and stronger brothers, and he includes himself. We will all have to give an account at God's judgment seat.

⁴ If you were in a dispute with someone, and you were right and they were wrong, God will make that clear on Judgment Day. But if you were the one in the wrong He will make that clear too. That other person will be vindicated, which means you will be reproved by the Lord. If you have a dispute with another believer, do whatever you possible can to resolve it immediately. Because I promise you do not want to arrive at Judgment Day and hear Jesus Christ say, "I commanded you to reconcile, and to make that a priority even above worship. I gave you instructions on how to do it, and I gave you My Spirit to empower you to do it. So why am I having to resolve this issue now?" Maybe you just can't bring yourself to humble yourself and admit your wrongs because you are so mad at that person for their wrongs. No question – that is a hard thing to do. But I assure you, if you put it off until Judgment Day, that is something you will regret. If you do all you can to work it out now, you will be rewarded on Judgment Day. But if Jesus has to work it out on Judgment Day, you are not going to like what He is going to say to you at that point.

name is written in the Lamb's Book of Life, imagine how horrible it will be for those whose names are not there! This is what drives us in evangelism and missions – when we see the terrifying reality of facing Judgment Day as an unbeliever. It is tragic that the church has so downplayed the topic of Judgment Day because knowing about Judgment Day could result in a lot of people ending up in heaven rather than hell. It is part of the gospel message. When Paul was trying to win Felix to faith in Christ it says **he discoursed on righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come** (Acts 24:25). When the angel in Revelation 14 proclaims the eternal gospel to the inhabitants of the earth, here is his message:

Revelation 14:7 He said in a loud voice, “Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come.

Judgment Day should make us fear God. In the case of unbelievers – they should fear damnation. And in the case of believers, we fear having to give an account and suffering shame.

Shame

I mentioned that last week, and some of you were alarmed at the idea of shame on that Day for the believer. But Scripture does affirm that as a possibility.

2 Timothy 2:15 Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed.⁵

What if Timothy does not do that? He will be a workman that does need to be ashamed. What do we think – that we will be happy about our sin? Giving an account will be a joyful thing?

Loss

We will not enjoy giving an account – nor will we enjoy suffering loss of reward.

1 Corinthians 3:12 If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, 13 his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. 14 If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. 15 If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.

Think of the things you have done in your life that will have an impact on eternity. Those things are like non-flammable materials. Other things you do in this life have an impact only in this life. Think of those as being like kindling or paper. Put all the things you have ever done your whole life, and build it into a house. On Judgment Day, Jesus will torch that house. All the work you put into causing people to like you or be impressed with you – *poof*, up in flames. Time you spend on vacation or the weekend where you were doing nothing for the glory of God – goes up like tissue paper. Efforts that you put into ministry at church that were based on human wisdom rather than the Word of God – they seemed like such solid, sturdy, wooden beams. But in that inferno of fire they become a pile of ashes. The only things that don't burn are those things that were done for eternity. Vacations you took where you used the vacation to increase your love for God. Ministry that you engaged in that was empowered by the Spirit and that was carried out according to God's Word. Those things are like marble pillars or steel framing. So you stand back as the structure burns. And when the smoke clears, whatever is left – that is the basis for your heavenly reward. Only one life, soon is past. Only what's done for Christ will last. Right now counts forever.

And distinguishing between the junk and the gems is not easy. Not even Paul was confident that his assessment of his own life was right on, because there is so much that goes into it. God will assess our thoughts and intentions (Heb.4:12-13). He will assess all our words – even the careless ones that come out of our mouths and we don't even think about it (Mt.12:36). And our motives will be weighed – good ones, bad ones, and mixed ones (1 Cor.4:3-5).

⁵ See also 1 Jn.2:28.

Rewards Matter

One of the reasons the judgment seat has been taken so lightly by Christians is because they have been taught that rewards don't matter. It won't be a big deal to you. And that teaching is couched in humility ("I don't need reward – I just do what's right just because it's right.") But not only does that contradict Jesus' teaching, but it rips the force out of the threat of losing rewards. If rewards don't matter, then losing rewards won't matter either so who cares about the warning in 1 Corinthians 3? Let my rewards burn up – who cares? That is pure unbelief. I promise you, on Judgment Day God's rewards will matter more than anything has ever mattered to you.

Another common teaching is this idea that everyone gets the exact same reward in heaven. But that contradicts multiple parables that Jesus taught about degrees of reward based on faithfulness. For example, the parable of the minas in Luke 19.

Luke 19:11 While they were listening to this, he went on to tell them a parable, because he was near Jerusalem and the people thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once.

People who think Jesus' return is right around the corner sometimes fail to invest in long term ministry, and so Jesus wanted to address that.

13 he called ten of his servants and gave them ten minas. 'Put this money to work,' he said, 'until I come back.'

When he comes back he calls in the servants to see how they did.

16 "The first one came and said, 'Sir, your mina has earned ten more.' 17 " 'Well done, my good servant!' his master replied. 'Because you have been trustworthy in a very small matter, take charge of ten cities.' 18 "The second came and said, 'Sir, your mina has earned five more.' 19 "His master answered, 'You take charge of five cities.'

The first servant was praised: "Well done!" and then rewarded. The servant who got only a 500% return was still richly rewarded – five cities, but not nearly as much as the first servant. And the master does not say "well done" to him.

So the idea that we all get the same reward does not square with passages like that. Plus, it rips away all the significance of this life. People who teach that are basically saying that not only does the cross wipe out our whole life prior to conversion, but it also wipes out our whole Christian life. So there is no connection at all between your life in this world and the next life. No difference at all in the way Jesus commends the Apostle Paul and a Christian who was mostly lazy, indolent, and unfruitful. I do not see how that could possibly be harmonized with what God's Word teaches. Jonathan Edwards certainly didn't think that way. Let me read you one of his resolutions: "Resolved, to endeavor to obtain for myself as much happiness, in the other world, as I possibly can with all the power, might, vigor, and vehemence, yea violence, I am capable of, or can bring myself to exert, in any way that can be thought of." That is exactly how Jesus taught us to live. We need to face the fact that right now counts forever.

Content to Be a Janitor in Heaven?

Sometimes you hear people say, "I'll be content to be a janitor in heaven. I don't need any special rewards or positions." That attitude is so dishonoring to Christ, because the rewards are expressions of His love. What if your wife came to you and said, "Hey, if you work hard today so you can get home early, I have plans to express my gratitude to you, and I promise it will be a night you'll never forget!" And you say, "No thanks. I don't need any special recognition. Those kinds of things don't motivate me. I'm content to just sleep on the couch – as long as I just get to be your husband – that's all I care about." Does that honor her?

If God matters then His rewards matter, which means loss of rewards matters. That is why God warns us to be careful not to lose our reward.

2 John 7 Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. ... 8 Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully.

Questions

When Will Judgment Day Happen?

Is it possible that each person gets judged the moment they die? I don't think so, for a few reasons. First, there seems to be an emphasis in the judgment passages on all of humanity being gathered together. Second, Jesus connects Judgment Day to the day of resurrection. In Luke 14:14 Jesus said it will happen **at the resurrection of the righteous.**⁶ And that makes sense, because God wants the rightness of His judgments to be manifest, which means all the evidence needs to be out on the table. But the outcome of your work cannot be tabulated accurately until after the Second Coming. When Tracy dies, what will the fruit of her ministry be? We won't know yet. So much of her life was spent raising our kids. What kind of eternal fruit will come from that? We will have to wait and see what they do, and what things Tracy instilled in them that they will pass on to their kids and grandkids, and the friends they will influence, and what influence those friends pass on to other friends. Paul said to the Philippians that the good work He started in them He would continue all the way until the Second Coming (Php.1:6). That is not talking about their salvation. The point is that the impact of the ministry of the people in that church would go on for thousands of years after they all died. For you to be evaluated right after you die would be premature.

Does Confession Matter on Judgment Day?

Another question - will we be judged for *every* sin we commit as believers or only for sins we failed to confess? Answer – every act will be judged.

Ecclesiastes 12:14 For God will bring every act to judgment, including every hidden thing, whether good or evil.

Everything – confessed or unconfessed. In 1 Corinthians 3 we saw that if your work is made out of worthless things, that will all burn up in the fires of judgment. So if you spend your life doing worthless things and then ask forgiveness, you are forgiven but that forgiveness is not going to magically go back and transform your life's work of wood, hay and stubble into gold, silver, and precious stones. So that loss of reward will still be an issue.

However, I do think that the sins you confessed and repented of in this life will be dealt with in a different way than unconfessed sins. I say that because they are dealt with by God a different way even in this life.

1 Corinthians 10:29 For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. 30 That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. 31 But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment.

If a person is continuing in some sin, so that the Lord has to discipline him with some temporal judgment like making him sick or taking his life, if that person would just judge himself – examine his

⁶ Some teach that there will be at least two Judgment Days – one for the righteous and another for the wicked. And that is a possibility. Several passages seem to connect Judgment Day with the resurrection, and Revelation 20 says there will be two resurrections. First the resurrection of the righteous, then, 1000 years later, the resurrection of the wicked. So it is possible there will be two judgments. But on the other hand, the sheep and goats parable sure makes it sound like the righteous and the wicked will both be at the same judgment. And I think you could make a similar argument about the Great White Throne judgment.⁶ So all that to say, I don't know if there will be two Judgment Days. From what I can tell, the prophetic language is not specific enough for us to be dogmatic about that.

own heart and discover the sin and deal with it, then God would not need to bring that discipline. If that is the case in this life, perhaps there is a similar situation on Judgment Day – where confessed sins will be dealt with differently than unconfessed sins. But still, every deed will be judged.

What about Forgiveness?

How can I be held accountable for my sins in Judgment Day if Christ bore all my guilt on the cross and my sins are separated from me as far as the east is from the west? The punishment for our sins has been paid in full – no question about that. But let me ask you this: are there ever times when God allows us to suffer any kind of negative consequence for forgiven sin in this life? Does that ever happen? For example, suppose a man commits murder and goes to prison. Then in prison he repents and asks God's forgiveness for his sin. When God forgives him, does that mean he will automatically get out of prison that same day, and never suffer any kind of negative consequence for this sin the rest of his life? Of course not. What happened when David repented of his sin?

2 Samuel 12:13 ... “The LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die. 14 But because by doing this you have made the enemies of the LORD show utter contempt, the son born to you will die.”

Not only that, he had to deal with never ending bloodshed the rest of his life. So in what sense was he forgiven? First, God was no longer angry with him. The broken relationship between David and God was restored. That is mainly what forgiveness is – the restoration of the broken relationship. So always remember that – just because there are still consequences for your sin does not mean God is still angry with you.

Secondly, his forgiveness meant David would not have to get what he deserved for that sin, which was death. Yes, there were consequences, but those consequences were not even in the same ballpark as the punishment he deserved. When God forgives your sins, that means God will not give you what you *deserve*. However, He will give you what you *need*. And in some cases you might need some negative consequences. Discipline is not the same thing as punishment.

I think a lot of times we are shocked at the concept that God could forgive us but still discipline us because we have such a shallow understanding of how serious our sin really is and what it deserves. Picture a person who commits multiple murders, rapes, kidnapping, torture – all kinds of horrible things. He gets arrested and stands before the judge and says, “I’m so sorry for all these things I did. I was wrong, but I’ve changed now.” So the judge says, “I believe you so I’m going to give you a full pardon. You’re free to go. But let me just tell you this – do you see those grieving people over there whose lives were devastated by your crimes? Keep that in mind next time you are tempted to commit murder.” And the guy flies off the handle and says, “What?! First you say I get a full pardon, then you punish me by trying make me feel bad for what I did. That’s no pardon! That’s full blown punishment!” What would you say to a man like that? You think you received punishment? If you think that little remark by the judge is punishment, obviously you have no concept of what your crimes really deserved. The punishment we deserve for every single one of our sins is eternal torment and agony in the lake of fire. If God gives us some kind of discipline or negative consequence for our sin, we need to understand - that is not even in the same universe as actual punishment.

In Revelation 3-4 Jesus dictates letters to seven churches in which He evaluates each church. He praises them for what they did well, and rebukes them for what they did not do well. If Jesus would do that in Revelation 3-4, why do we think it would be so outrageous that He would do something similar for each one of us on Judgment Day? The Christians in those churches were forgiven for all their sins, and yet Jesus still rebukes them for the things they were doing wrong. That is not a contradiction at all.

Does that mean we might be miserable in heaven because of the consequences of our sin? No. Whatever tears we might shed on Judgment Day will no doubt be eclipsed by the joy of our reward. And if any tears do remain when it’s all said and done, God will wipe those away once and for all and we will never know sorrow again.

Should We Look Forward to This Day or Dread It?

Should we be dreading this Day or looking forward to it? That one is easy – look forward to it! It will be the greatest day of your life!

“But what about the tears and shame and sorrow and loss?”

Answer – avoid as much of that as possible by being faithful now. But will there be some of that? Yes. Will it cancel out our joy at seeing the Lord? No.

“But I can’t understand how it could be a joyful day overall, but still have some painful elements.”

This is a very important lesson on how to read the Bible. What do you do when the Bible says something that is hard to imagine? Should we force the Bible to conform to what is easy for us to imagine? Should we dictate to the Bible what is possible or not possible to feel? Or should we bow before the Almighty and say, “My thoughts are not Your thoughts – please God, change my thoughts to be like Yours”? When you see something in the Bible that is hard, and you say, “That just doesn’t resonate in my heart” – change you heart! If the Bible says “Look forward to this marvelous day, and live in fear for that Day” and that does not compute in my mind, that means my mind is messed up and I need to change.

But let me at least say this - when you think about the tension between fearing judgment and enjoying forgiveness, here is a guideline: The fear of God's displeasure should come into play not when we think about our past sins, but when we think about future sins (or present sins). When you think about past sins, think about forgiveness. But when you face temptation, think about Judgment Day. If I am tempted to steal something tomorrow, or if I am currently stealing something right now, thoughts of Judgment Day should make me turn away from that sin because of fear. But when I think about past sin, there is no value to thinking about the fact that I will have to give an account, and so I focus on the forgiveness part.

Conclusion: Everything Matters

Let me close by tying this in with Ecclesiastes. I told you at the beginning of our study that I believe the best translation of the word HEVEL is not *meaningless*, but rather *futile*. The NIV translates it, “Everything is meaningless.” I don’t think that is what he is saying. The creation was subjected to futility in the curse, but life is not meaningless. Just the opposite – the fact that God will bring everything into judgment means everything has meaning. If everything were meaningless, why would God waste His time judging a bunch of things that don’t matter? Any time a judgment is being made, the only evidence that is considered are those things that make a difference with regard to that judgment. If the teacher says, “Bring me that paper” that means that paper matters for that course grade. If the IRS audits you and says, “Let us see that document,” it means that document matters for their assessment. So when God says He will bring every single detail of life into judgment, that means every detail of life *matters*. Everything matters – the shoes you wear and how much you spent on them, what you do with your hair, the jokes you tell, the things you put in your mouth or don’t put in your mouth, the things you think about, the feelings you have, desires, motives, attitudes – every bit of it will be brought into judgment, which means everything matters. Right now matters forever.

That can be kind of overwhelming to think about, but on the other hand, think of how much meaning that gives to your life! If you think your life is meaningless or unimportant, you could not be more wrong. If it were meaningless or unimportant, God wouldn’t bring it into judgment. Our souls crave meaning. We want our actions to matter. That is why we are constantly passing judgment on the details of our own lives. You do some project, then you sit back and pass judgment: “That turned out great,” or, “It wasn’t my best effort.” We are constantly assessing ourselves and our actions, because we want meaning. But ultimately our assessments do not make our lives meaningful. If a student spends 50 hours writing a term paper, and hands it in, and the teacher says, “I never assigned this” and just hands it back– so there will be no evaluation, it won’t be read, all that work will have zero impact on your grade – that would be disheartening. If you get to the end of your life and there was no Judgment Day– no assessment of anything, no evaluation; God just said, “Oh, none of that stuff you did mattered. I don’t care about it” –

that would render your entire life meaningless. But that won't happen. The details of your life matter supremely. Right now matters forever.

Some of you are discouraged because you feel like your life has not really gone anywhere. You had dreams of making it big in this world, but it never really materialized. And now it feels like it is too late for your life to really count. Anyone who thinks that way has been brainwashed by this world into thinking that temporal achievements are what matter. Do you think on Judgment Day Jesus is going to ask anyone how many fans they had? No. That kind of thing is not going to matter in the slightest. What will matter? The things that will matter are things that you still have a shot at. It is not too late for you to make it big in the kingdom of God. The world measures making it big by how many people are under you. But real greatness is measured in how many people you served, and how much you glorified the Lord Jesus Christ in everything you did. And there is still time for you to make it big in that area.

1 Corinthians 9:24 Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. 25 Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. 26 Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. 27 No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be rejected.

Benediction: Psalms 9:7 The Lord reigns forever; he has established his throne for judgment. 8 He will judge the world in righteousness; he will govern the peoples with justice. 9 The Lord is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. 10 Those who know your name will trust in you, for you, Lord, have never forsaken those who seek you.

Application Questions (James 1:25)

- 1) Do rewards matter enough to you to motivate you to strive for them and to avoid losing them?
- 2) Name a few things in your life that, if Judgment Day were today, you believe Christ would reward you for.
- 3) Name some things that you are working toward because you would really love to be rewarded for on that Day.