

"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Romans 1:7b

SERMON THEME: "When Eternal Life Begins"

SERMON TEXT: John 5:24

(Read first)

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

My earliest recall of really paying attention in worship was at about the age of 6 or 7. Already then I was listening to the sermons, and when Pastor Goetzendaner pounded the pulpit in making a point, I was "all ears"! One Sunday he really caught my attention when he talked about Judgment Day. My childhood mind formed a picture of many people standing in line waiting to face God to find out whether they were going to heaven or hell. I remember wondering how long that would take! I understood that people who loved Jesus and obeyed Him were going to heaven, and I also understood that hell was a very terrible place where surely no one would want to go! As adulthood inevitably came, and my study of the Scriptures progressed, I came to realize that what I had envisioned was nowhere near the reality for the true believer!

More than once someone has said something that has led me to believe I was not the only one picturing an appearance before an almighty Judge! Just recently, one of our good people said to me, "I think I'll be okay on Judgment Day." That, in part, was one of the reasons for today's text selection. The truth of the matter, as we find it here in Jesus' own words, ranks with some of the greatest comfort and assurance passages we find in the Bible, God's holy Word!

There is going to be a Judgment Day alright! And it's not that far away. But hear this: For those of us who have opened the door of our hearts to let Jesus in, who are truly Christ-like people, there will be no Judgment Day! Judgment is not for us! Judgment Day is for those who think they are smarter than God, or deny that He even exists. It will be a terrible day for those who stubbornly refuse to believe in Him, to worship Him or yield to His holy will by keeping His commandments! Five times in Matthew, 4 times in parables, Jesus speaks of the fate of those pitiable souls who persist in their unbelief, summed up in this

passage: "The Son of man will send His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth" (Matthew 13:41, 42). There IS an ultimate justice! God *will* destroy all that is evil! Judgment Day is inescapable for souls who put their trust in themselves, or their good works, rather than their Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier and His saving grace!

We are spared the final judgment because Jesus was judged in our place! Though innocent, He was found guilty before the heavenly Judge, was sentenced to death, and died to pay the "wages" of our sins! He took our place in God's court of law! The almighty Father accepted Him as our Substitute; He allowed His precious Son to sacrifice Himself so we could be declared innocent of sin! "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son..." And His Son Jesus, for the same reason, His love for us, willingly took our sins—our guilt—upon Himself so we would not have to stand before the divine Judge! The moment Jesus paid the price for our sins, our acquittal became possible! All penitent sinners past, present, and future, were forgiven, declared righteous, justified, no longer condemned! It was when the verdict "Not guilty" was decreed, that we became heirs of a heavenly glory!

This was planned from the beginning. As Paul wrote to the Ephesian congregation, our redemption was sealed even before the foundation of the world; "(God) destined us in love to be His sons through Jesus Christ" (1:5)! The good news is, that "whoever believes in (Jesus) will not perish, but have everlasting life." Through a living faith in Christ Jesus, and sincere repentance, together with our commitment to live holy lives like He did, we are no longer sinners subject to judgment! We are seen by the heavenly Father as holy, sinless, cleansed of any imperfection, restored to the "image of God", the holiness Adam and Eve had when they were first created! Peter spelled it out: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people..." (1 Peter 2:9). Still sinners in the flesh, yes, but saints in God's eyes!

And as children of the heavenly Father, we are secure in His household; the devil and all his evil angels cannot break in and

steal us away! "Neither death, nor life, nor angels, or principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38, 39). We are citizens of heaven NOW! Today! Every man, woman and child here who confesses from the heart that Jesus is Lord, and believes God the Father raised Him from the dead, is saved! The judgment *has already* been rendered! By the grace of the God of heaven, by His undeserved kindness, and His mercy and compassion rooted in love, we can know the outcome for our souls now; eternal life begins in the here and now!

Our souls, alive today through faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, will never die! Jesus said so: "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die" (John 11:25, 26)! Simply put, Jesus gives eternal life to everyone who hears and believes His Word and does what He says! And He's not talking about some future date, or when our flesh dies. For the true Christian, born again "of water and of the Spirit", meaning baptized into Christ, eternal life is present reality! *When does eternal life* begin? It begins at the instant one is joined with Jesus in baptism; it begins immediately when one comes to a living faith in the risen Christ! Judgment does not come into the picture! For the redeemed of God, Judgment Day is long past. No child of God ever need fear the prospect of a final judgment because for him or her there is none!

"Truly, truly..." our text begins. This repetition is for emphasis. This is Jesus' way of saying, "What I have to say to you is extremely important!" (Luther would probably have said, "This is most certainly true!") Then Jesus speaks as a Judge rendering a verdict. He continues with, "I say to you..." Jesus is speaking as God; His divine nature surfaces. This further emphasizes how profound the words He is about to utter should be to the hearer: "...he who hears My word and believes Him who sent Me..." He's clearly addressing the true believer, not one who is Christian in name only. Now comes the real point, and the message to us in this hour. The soul dedicated to Christ, the sincere believer, the real Christian, "...has eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life." We might pause

here to say, "Praise the Lord!" "Amen"! "Hallelujah!"

If you're up on your grammar, notice the tenses here: "...he who hears My word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life; he does not come into judgment but has passed from death to life." Present and past tense: it's already done; judgment for the faithful is out of the picture! There simply is none! Temporal death or death of the flesh only leads the true believer into a far better life! Death for us is a mere transition from life on earth to life in heaven! And this move to the heavenly mansion is not measured on the clock or calendar; it is instantaneous, "in a moment, in the twinkling (or blink) of an eye," as Paul puts it (1 Corinthians 15:52). Solomon explains it so simply, "the dust (or flesh) returns to the earth as it was and the spirit returns to God who gave it" (Ecclesiastes 12:7)! Eternal life, the unending life of our souls, *begins in this life!* We don't wait for it. If you're walking hand-in-hand with Jesus this morning, He is going to lead you right on into heaven—no Judgment Day for you!

Only those who have rejected the Spirit of the living Christ have cause to worry or doubt. Only those who have once been enlightened by the Gospel, who have tasted the heavenly gift of salvation and the grace and forgiveness of God, and then have fallen away—committing the sin of apostasy—have good reason to be afraid (Hebrews 6:4-6)!

Let's say it another way: heaven has already begun for all of us who love our Lord with all of our heart, mind, and soul! Trials and temptations during this short time on earth, yes! Our faith must be tested to make sure it's genuine. But soon there will be no more tears, nor mourning, nor pain, no cause for fear! A forever life in glory has begun already; it is a present reality! That is why we can say at the passing of a loved one who is close to the Jesus, "I believe she's with the Lord NOW!

While we're still here it is our calling to witness to others about the gift of eternal life we have today! Jude tells us not to just stand back and let people suffer the curse of Judgment Day! "Convince some who doubt," he says. "Save some by snatching them out of the fire; have mercy (on them)" (v. 23)! God Himself once said, "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but desire that the wicked turn from his way and live" (Ezekiel

33:11). That's the kind of God we have—full of grace and mercy and willingness to forgive right up to the end! And we are His outstretched arms and voice of mercy! Whether family, friends, fellow students or coworkers, we can share the joy of knowing that our never-ending life has already started! Our eternal prize has already been awarded! A forever life in glory is now, today, present tense, the outcome of our faith! When the trumpet sounds, and our Lord Jesus comes from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, we are ready to be lifted up—no judgment, no waiting in line, just a glorious exit from earth!

**In conclusion, these inspired words from Hebrews 10:
“*Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together..., but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near*” (vv. 23-25). In Jesus’ name, Amen.**

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding will keep your hearts and minds through a living faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Rev. Donald P. Tonack

