

## Comparing the Two Coming Judgments

Many Bible interpreters assume there is only one judgment at the end of the age, a judgment that separates believers from unbelievers. This causes major problems in harmonizing some Scriptures. For example, in John 5:24 Jesus says that anyone who believes in Him “shall not come into judgment,” but in 2 Corinthians 5:10 Paul says of believers, “. . . we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ.” If these speak of the same judgment, they would be in contradiction. How should we view these coming judgments?

### Distinguishing between the two judgments

All people face a judgment (Heb. 9:27). The Bible speaks of two great coming judgments (though we also recognize specific judgments for Jews and Gentiles who live in or through the Tribulation; e.g., Matt. 25:31-46; Rev. 20:4-5). Both judgments involve people’s works.

The first is a final judgment of condemnation for only unbelievers. John 5:24 relates to those who believe in Jesus Christ and receive eternal life. They will not have to face the final judgment of Revelation 20:11-15, a judgment of unbelievers after Christ’s return to earth as King. Works are mentioned there as evidence that their condemnation and suffering is deserved.

The Bible also speaks clearly about a judgment facing only believers, called the Judgment Seat of Christ (Greek, *bēma*). In this judgment, believers will not be judged for their faith in Christ as Savior, but for their faithfulness in following Christ as Lord. There, believers will have to give an account for how they used their lives. One’s works determines whether one is rewarded or denied rewards.

These two judgments can be compared in this chart:

Which Judgment?	Great White Throne	Judgment Seat of Christ
Who is judged?	Only unbelievers	Only believers
When is the judgment?	After the millennium	After the Rapture and before the Marriage Supper of the Lamb
What is the witness?	Books and the Book of Life	Each person gives account
What is the role of works?	Evidence for condemnation and degree of suffering	Basis for rewards or denial of rewards
What is the final result?	Eternal condemnation	Rewards bestowed or withheld
What is the issue?	Faith in Christ as Savior	Faithfulness to Christ as Lord
What are the main Bible passages?	Dan. 12:1-3; John 5:22-29; Rev. 20:11-15	Rom. 14:10; 1 Cor. 3:11-15; 4:1-5; 2 Cor. 5:10; 2 Tim. 4:8

### The difference it makes

If the two coming judgments are confused into one general judgment, then good works become necessary for salvation, because works play a role in both judgments. Of course, this would contradict clear statements of Scripture such as Romans 3:19-4:5; Galatians 2:16; Ephesians 2:8-9, and Titus 3:5. It would be impossible to say that we are saved by grace as a free gift from God. Works are mentioned in both judgments, but never as the basis or condition for salvation.

This would also radically change the motivation for godly conduct. External good works would be sought as evidence of salvation, or conversely, the fear of insufficient works would leave many in doubt of their salvation and in fear of eternal condemnation. The focus on outward conduct can be deceptive and detract from true inner godliness. Living in doubt and fear about one's salvation is never a good basis for growing in grace.

Confusion of the two judgments would also undermine the accountability of Christians as a motivation for godly conduct. Believers who do not fear condemnation find the freedom to live their lives in light of their final evaluation at the Judgment Seat of Christ. Having their eternal salvation secure should motivate believers to serve God and live godly because of love and gratitude toward God. The fear factor is removed, as far as eternal salvation is concerned.

## Conclusion

The two great coming judgments are different for believers and unbelievers respectively. Those who have believed in Jesus Christ as Savior will not come under judgment for their salvation, but will escape condemnation. However, they will have to give an account for how they lived as Christians. Those who have rejected Jesus Christ as Savior face only a judgment of condemnation ending in the Lake of Fire. Appropriately, the Bible ends with both a reminder of rewards for believers, ““And behold, I [Jesus] am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work”” (Rev. 22:12), as well as an invitation to unbelievers:

And the Spirit and the Bride say, “Come!” And let him who hears say, “Come!” And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take of the water of life freely. (Rev. 22:17).