

Christians in the hands of an angry God?

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For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ... 2 Corinthians 5:10

Dread or joy? What will judgment be like for Christians?

We heard in a sermon that we Christians will give account for every careless word, unrighteous thought and waste of time since becoming believers. Afterwards, those sins will be forgiven like those when we first believed.

We thought, “Where is the *good news* in that? Are we to count that as our *blessed hope*?”

True, certain New Testament verses declare Christians will stand before Christ in some kind of judgment. Opinions differ as to what this entails. Some think we must account for sins committed since becoming believers. Others see it as limited to a judgment of rewards for work done for Christ.

This essay supports the view that a judgment will take place for Christians but not a review of sins or rebuke for failures. There will be an evaluation of which works receive reward versus those that do not.

After showing scriptural support for the traditional *judgment-of-rewards* view, we will look at some texts used by those supporting the *review-of-sins* position.

Part one

Burned or blessed?

The key chapters addressing judgment on Christians are 1Corinthians 3 and 4. These stand as a plumb line for interpreting single verses on that subject.

This follows the majority rule approach to biblical interpretation. Other verses must yield to texts that discuss the topic at length and with clarity.

It is clear that a judgment on Christians is in view in 1Corinthians 3. We must not minimize this. The question is what kind of judgment? Is it a judgment on sin or on something else?

If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire, (verse 15). (ESV)

Loss of work accomplished is in view, not the loss of salvation. ...*he himself will be saved...*

Notice here some work is describe as accomplished. Christian work. Things built in the name of Christ that God counts as worthless, deserving no reward and worthy of destruction.

What could this mean? What kind of Christian work deserves to be destroyed?

Doing God's work God's way on the foundation he established is the point. God rewards what he orders and is done his way.

The foundation

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. 11 For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ, (verses 10,11).

Jesus Christ is the foundation. Can we build any way we choose? The answer is no.

Let each one take care how he builds upon it, (verse 11).

The church is the *field* and *building*.

You are God's field, God's building, (verse 9).

Do we have the right to work in the church as we see fit? Or plant any church anywhere as we please and do it by any means? Not if we expect a reward.

Whose paradigm shall we follow? The latest fad floating through evangelical circles? How should we plant a new church? By Paul's directions as laid down in his epistles? Or according to the "wisdom" of the latest expert in missiology?

In the context Paul warns, *Let no one deceive himself*, (verse 18). That's easy to do—following our own notions of how to proceed rather than seeking God's will and pattern in his word.

Christian workers might also deceive themselves by an excess emphasis on culture; thinking we must be up to date about current trends and the latest world views in order to do effective work. Such an approach has some merit but must not be the guiding principle in our procedures.

If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is folly with God, (verses 18,19).

When my wife and I were ministering in Ecuador, our mission team leader was discussing church planting with the team. He said, "It is possible to come here with a lot of money and build a church and look successful. But is it of God?"

Good point! How much Christian work is actually a man building his own kingdom? Is building on the foundation of the name of Jesus sufficient for God's approval?

Not quite. Paul clarified that work built in the name of Jesus must also be accomplished God's way by God's principles.

Rewards are in view here

If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward, (verse 14).

For there to be rewards, God must distinguish between what deserves reward and what does not. This is a judgment but not a fearful kind like a judgment on sin.

A difficulty in discussing this topic is the word *judgment*. This word tends to carry the connotation of reproach or punishment. The Greek term *krino* "to judge," is used nowhere in 1Corinthians 3. It would seem Paul was thinking more of an *evaluation*, which may explain why he used three other terms than *judgment* in verse 13 to describe the process.

...each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done, (verse 13).

Notice the three words to describe the reward scenario: *disclose; revealed; test*. None of these are derivatives of the Greek term *krino*.

Though there will be an evaluation, we can look forward to it because it is all about rewards.

Motives

Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.
1Corinthians 4:5

It would seem there will be a revealing of motives, *the purposes of the heart*. This goes along with 1Corinthians 3. Not only the quality of works accomplished shall be tested but also the motives for doing them. For those with good motives, this is a promise of *commendation*.

A similar text in Romans 14 involves questions of personal conscience.

Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God;... 12 So then each of us will give an account of himself to God. Romans 14:10,12

The entire chapter is devoted to issues of personal conscience such food, drink and observance of days. We avoid judging one another about these because each will give account of himself with regard to those matters.

Some legalistic Christians who expect commendation from God for strict observance of rules he did not command, may receive a shock on that day. Others may receive commendation because they abstained from something as an act of worship.

The same is true of our motives for doing God's work.

Summary

God rewards works he has ordered, directed and accomplished his way through his servants and with proper motives. This has nothing to do with remaining sins. Everything else is fuel for a bonfire.

Short-changing justification

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Romans 5:1

The term *justified* in the Bible means “declared” righteous. It does not mean “made” righteous.¹

This declaration comes from God the moment we put our faith in Jesus Christ. It is not a process. The reason God makes this declaration is because the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us at that moment.²

This imputed righteousness is complete, apart from our own personal obedience to moral law:

...and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith. Philippians 3:9

This brings up two questions relative to the view that believers face a future judgment for remaining sins: The *nature* of the righteousness previously imputed and the *timing* of the event.

If such a judgment takes place, it would be for one of two reasons. Either the declaration of being justified is a process or the righteousness imputed is partial. Neither makes sense.

Timing

Judges in a court of law pronounce verdicts of *guilty* or *not guilty*. They do not take a week to declare it. They do not say the word *not* on Monday and then pronounce the word *guilty* on Tuesday. If they did, the suspect would have no peace until the declaration was finished.

It is precisely this element of peace that is in question in Romans 5:1. Notice the past tense, *we have been justified*. This event is complete and not repeated. It would be in another tense if it were meant to be repeated.³ The immediate result is *peace*.

On God’s part or ours? It hardly matters.

If on God’s part, at what time will he cease being at peace if we must face a future judgment for sin? Likewise, how can we have a present sense of peace if we anticipate such a future event?

A partial peace is no peace at all.

Imputed righteousness

Imputed righteousness comes from God. His righteousness lacks nothing. Why must one appear before him to be judged for remaining sin?

*... the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.
Romans 3:22*

Whose obedience?

For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. Romans 5:19

God attributes to us the obedience Christ, not just the forgiveness of sin. God accepts us on the grounds of his obedience. Our defective obedience is overlooked. Why then would we be judged?

What charges?

*Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.
Romans 8:33*

God does not accept charges against his elect whom he justifies. Why declare them justified if he intends to charge them again in the future?

Room for wrath?

Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. Romans 5:9

The word *therefore* implies the conclusion is inevitable— no wrath. Ever.

The blood of Jesus not only made it possible for God to declare us righteous, much more it guarantees this declaration will never change. It washed away the wrath also.

By what law would we judged?

And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, 14 by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. Colossians 2:13,14

The *legal demands* of the moral law were *cancelled* in the cross. By what other law would we be judged in the future?

Double justification

The only way a judgment for remaining sin on Christians could be valid is to hold to a doctrine of double justification; partly now and partly later. This is not taught in the New Testament nor does it make sense.⁴ No such thing is found in Scripture as *sort of not guilty*. Neither do we find *sort of forgiven* nor *temporarily forgiven*.

Summary

The righteousness imputed in justification is complete, eternal and unchanging. It is the righteousness of Christ himself. It declares us legally righteous which results in peace with God because his wrath is eternally satisfied. He accepts no accusations against his elect, not now, not ever.

Second coming

Most of the texts dealing with the second coming describe believers looking forward to it with great anticipation and eagerness. How can they do so if they are going to face a negative evaluation or a review of their sins?

Titus 2:13

... waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ,

It seems difficult to call a judgment for failure a *blessed hope*. The clause clearly refers to the second coming.

1Thessalonians 5:9

For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ,

The context refers to pending judgment upon unbelievers.

...then sudden destruction will come upon them ... and they will not escape.
1Thessalonians 5:3

Sin deserves wrath. If no wrath, how then could there be a judgment for sin?

2Thessalonians Chapter 1— The nature of the second coming

- The *righteous judgment of God*, refers to God's evaluation of believers as worthy of his kingdom, verse 5.
- This involves vindication of believers by judgment on those who have afflicted them, verse 6.
- In contrast to this judgment on unbelievers is *to grant relief to you who are afflicted...when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven... verse 7.*
- This event involves Jesus being glorified in his saints, and to be *marveled at among all who have believed... verse 10.*

Everything in 2Thessalonians 1 points to an attitude of joyful expectation as regards the second coming. Our appearance before the Lord will be a time of vindication, not an event to dread.

Hebrews 9:26-28

But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. 27 And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, 28 so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those

who are eagerly waiting for him.

Sin has been *put away* by the sacrifice of Christ. On what basis would there be an accounting for sin?

After death the judgment – There is a judgment after death. However, in the context, this appears to be a judgment on unbelievers because it is in contrast to what follows: ... *having been offered once to bear the sins of many...*

The atonement is for *many*, not all. This is limited atonement. For whom the sacrifice is made, he *will appear a second time, not to deal with sin.* Whatever he will deal with regarding believers, it will not be for sin. It will be to *save those who are eagerly waiting for him.*

If his coming were for dealing with sin, why wait for him eagerly?

1Corinthians 1:7,8

... so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, 8 who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The promise to the Corinthians, immature as they were, is a guiltless status on the day of their appearing before Jesus at his coming.

Jude 24,25

Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, 25 to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.

Christians are to trust God to present them blameless before him. *Great joy* is the Christian attitude toward this event.

Summary

For the Christian, the second coming is his *blessed hope*. This will be a vindication before the world of his status as a holy one of God and a relief from persecution. He knows he is not *destined for wrath* and any judgments will not be to deal with sin. He can look forward to the event eagerly.

Sin-consciousness

For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. 2 Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? Hebrew 10:1,2

In Hebrews 10, we see a contrast between two opposing states of mind. In one, the believer lives a life conscious of his sins; in the other, a life without sin-consciousness. The issue is not that the believer is lacking in sin but that he may live without a nagging consciousness of it.

Under the law, that is impossible because the law requires perfect obedience. If the believer thinks that *any* sin –past, present or future– will be brought into judgment or reproof, this creates a sin-consciousness and perpetual fear, contrary to the intent of the gospel as portrayed in this chapter.

Hebrews 10:3

But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year.

Great news! Under the law there is a reminder of sins. Under the gospel, no reminder of sins. Though Christians will come into judgment of some kind, it will not involve a reminder of sins. If indeed such an examination took place, then this contrast between law and gospel is meaningless. Under the gospel, there is no reminder of sins; past, present or future.

Hebrews 10:7-10

Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.’ 8 When he said above, ‘You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings’ (these are offered according to the law), 9 then he added, ‘Behold, I have come to do your will.’ He does away with the first in order to establish the second. 10 And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Sanctified primarily means “set apart” for holy use and secondarily, “made holy.” The first is a legal status of which the experiential continues throughout life. The point: Although our sanctification is experientially incomplete, it is nevertheless *legally* complete. On the basis of what, then, do believers come into rebuke for sins in a final judgment?

Hebrews 10:11-14

And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. 12 But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, 13 waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. 14 For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

The believer, though experientially lacking, should consider his relationship with God as perfect. God's acceptance is based on a legal perfection, not on one's experiential degree of sanctification.

Hebrews 10:15-17

And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying, 16 "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds," 17 then he adds, "I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more."

This point refers back to the first verses of the chapter. The old way was a life of consciousness of sins; being reminded of them. The new way is without consciousness for sins nor being reminded of them, ever. Anything other than this, leads to a doctrine of second justification, which is heretical.

Hebrews 10:21,22

...and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

How could a believer draw near to God with *full assurance* if in the back of his mind is the thought that his sins, although forgiven, will be revisited?

If we consider our hearts *sprinkled clean from an evil conscience*, then this can only mean living a life free from a guilty conscience. This freedom is grounded on a perfect sacrifice, not on our own perfect performance. For those keenly aware of their remaining corruption, this sounds altogether too radical. Yet this is the point. We are to live a life free of a guilty conscience, for the blood for Jesus cleanses and keeps on cleansing from all sin.

Hebrews 10:23

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.

What might cause a believer to waiver in his confession? Fear of pending judgment is one way. How is that a hope? Such a view weakens our grip on hope. It weakens our

confidence in the inevitability of final sanctification. Jesus is the author and finisher of our faith (Hebrews 12:1,2).

Hebrews 10:24

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works,

The author apparently is thinking of positive motives such as love for Christ, appreciation for his sacrifice and the general need of believers to practice good works on the grounds of gratitude, not fear.

Notice the word *consider*. If the author had in mind a judgment for believers of any sort, there would be nothing to consider as a means to motivate them. Fear is enough.

Apparently the author is encouraging us to consider more positive motivations such as gratitude for the completed sacrifice of Christ, the freedom purchased for us, love for him and the natural desire of genuine believers for sanctification. For those who feel no such motivations, the message is different: *You must be born again!*

Hebrews 10:26,27

For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, 27 but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.

The *knowledge of the truth* here can only mean the freedom from fear of judgment because that is the whole point of the chapter. Those who keep on sinning in the face of a clear understanding of the sacrifice of Christ and its meaning, show they have accepted the truth intellectually only. For those, *a fearful expectation of judgment*. Note the contrast implied. For those without Christ, a fear of judgment. For those in Christ, none whatsoever.

Hebrews 10:28,29,35

Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. 29 How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? 35 Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward.

By what means could we throw away our confidence? By living out of law with a view to a judgment rather than grace through the completed work of Christ. Paradoxically, that is a way to deprive ourselves of reward! If we live in fear of judgment, then we serve out of a wrong motive. The work we do for Christ on that basis, deserves no reward.

Hebrews 10:36-38

For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. 37 For, “Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; 38 but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.”

This text refers to the second coming. The author expects the reader to live according to the terms described in the chapter. Otherwise, God will be displeased. Does this fit well into the idea of the second coming as a time when our sins are reviewed?

At least two negative motivations exist in Scripture for exhorting Christians to straighten up and fly right. These are paternal disciplines (Hebrews 12) and a possible loss of reward (1Corinthians 3). These exhortations are legitimate and must be preached.

It seems, however, that the author of Hebrews is offering motivations of a more positive nature than the negative ones above. When we consider the greatness of our high priest, the completeness of his sacrifice, God’s unlimited love and the grace that applies it all, those other motivations seem paltry. They fade into the background in a wave of gratitude. A sense of awe takes their place and a mature Christian doesn’t need them.

Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, 29 for our God is a consuming fire. Hebrews 12:28,29

From part one we learn...

As we review major themes regarding the gospel and its implications for life, we find that Christians will experience a judgment of rewards not a judgment for sin. These themes include:

- **Judgment of rewards, 1Corinthians 3 and 4**

We see Christians rewarded for work done God’s way with proper motives. Rewards are lost for anything done any other way.

- **Nature of justification**

The imputation of the perfect righteousness of Christ is the key part of justification. This satisfies the wrath of God, grants peace with him and complete acceptance without fear. God accepts no accusations against his justified people because Christ satisfied all the demands of the law. If Christians were to be judged for remaining sin, it would have to be on the basis of some other law than that which Christ removed by his sacrifice. No other law exists.

- **Second coming**

All texts describing the second coming imply this is an event Christians look forward to with eagerness and joy, without fear of judgment, even though all will stand before the judgment seat of Christ.

- **Sin consciousness**

According to Hebrews Chapter 10, the believer is to live a life free from a guilty conscience. Although he is aware of his remaining corruption, he knows the sacrifice of Christ frees him from fear of the law and its consequences. Therefore he may serve God without fear and approach him with full assurance of acceptance.

We will now look at key verses used by those holding the *judgment-for-sin* view.

Part two

Every careless word

I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned. Matthew 12:36,37

On the grounds of this text, some have taught that Christians will stand before the judgment seat of Christ and every careless word spoken will be brought into judgment. Then, because they are saved, those words along with wasting time and other such failures will be forgiven.

Context

To whom was Jesus speaking and what was he talking about in the Matthew 12 text?

Jesus had just healed a blind and mute man from demon oppression. While the people rejoiced, the Pharisees in their jealousy declared that Jesus was operating by the power of Satan. *It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons, (verse 24).*

The Pharisees were blaspheming Jesus and therefore on the verge of blaspheming the Holy Spirit. Jesus warns them of the consequence of this in verse 28:

But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

The message to those Pharisees was clear: If Jesus represented the kingdom of God and therefore his works were of the Holy Spirit, then the words the Pharisees uttered were about to seal their eternal damnation. Not because the words themselves perform such an action but because they exposed the unholy disposition of their unregenerate natures. Jesus indicates this in verse 34:

You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.

Those Pharisees were *careless* indeed. It is inconceivable that a Christian would even think to say what those Pharisees were saying.

The Apostle Paul would agree. His epistles teach that faith is the sole instrument for communicating saving grace. Words may express that faith but have no other power than to reveal the condition of the heart.

The term *justify* in this context

We know the word *justify* means “declare to be righteous.” It has a similar meaning also, “vindicate.” This is the sense used in James Chapter 2 when the authenticity of Abraham’s faith was vindicated by his works.

Jesus was telling the Pharisees that their manner of speaking revealed the condition of their hearts. If they were to declare him to be the Messiah, as he claimed by his word and proved by his deeds, this would *vindicate* their faith and prove it genuine. If they blasphemed him, as they were indeed doing, it would reveal the condemned condition of their souls. Their condemnation would be sealed if they persisted in attributing to the devil the works of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus was implying that the words these Pharisees spoke could be played back to them at the final judgment. Those words stand as evidence of their lost condition despite their external religiosity.

Further, the Pharisees held to justification by law. Jesus reminds them that to be justified by the law, they must keep it perfectly, to the last word uttered. If they are going to be judged by the law for the least thing they say, how much more shall they be judged for blaspheming the Messiah?

Do words justify?

We may ask, how many words would be necessary to speak in order to be justified, if justification comes by words?

Some have said that even though the careless words of a Christian will come into judgment, they will be forgiven. That mitigates the severity of the doctrine a bit but leaves a logic problem.

If our careless words are forgiven so they do not condemn us, then our remaining words must be good and therefore justify us. Do the epistles teach anywhere that this is a means of salvation?

Moreover, are good words counted as good works? If we are not saved by our works, then what is the point in relating the Matthew text to Christians?

Summary

It seems contradictory to the entire message of the epistles to apply to Christians a pre-crucifixion rebuke to Pharisees.

Confident longing

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.
2Corinthians 5:10

This verse is said to support the view that Christians will appear before the judgment seat of Christ to receive either reward or rebuke for the way they have lived. Our entire life, it is claimed, will be examined publically, down to the last careless word, including sins remaining in them since conversion.

Some, like Louis Berkhof in his **SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY**, claim this includes even our sins that have been pardoned.⁵ Others have a softer view; only those sins us committed after our conversion will be examined, although these will be subsequently forgiven.

Most evangelicals believe the purpose for Christians to appear before the judgment seat of Christ will be for rewards only, without rebuke for remaining sin, nor a review of such. It may include a loss of reward for work done for Christ that he did not order or direct as 1 Corinthians 3 indicates.

A difficulty in interpreting 2Corinthians 5:10 is the word *evil*. In view of the entire New Testament teaching on complete forgiveness by faith alone, not works, this presents a problem.

The context before verse 10

Nothing in 2Corinthians 5:10 nor the context describes what might be the content of the word *evil*. The Greek word for *evil* sheds some light but not much.

Thayer divides the Greek *PHAULON* into two categories: “Ordinary, mean, worthless, of no account.” Then, ethically, “bad, wicked, base.” So the word used for *evil* in this text could refer to sin but not necessarily. It is not the ordinary word for *sin*.⁶ It may refer to things that simply have no value; works accomplished that count for nothing as in 1Corinthians 3.

Lexographers Louw and Nida, in contrast to Thayer, define the word as “pertaining to being evil in the sense of moral baseness.”

Regardless of which lexographer is correct about the meaning of *PHAULON*, the context of 2Corinthians 5 sheds light on what it *cannot* mean.

A confident longing

For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. 2 For

in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, 3 if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. 2Corinthians 5:1-3

Paul likens our body to a tent. Notice the contrast between *groan* and *longing*. The normal Christian desires to be free from this mortal body. The preference is to be shed of it and be present with the Lord. This is described as a *longing*.

He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee (verse 5).

This departure from our earthly *tent*, to be clothed with our heavenly one, is what God has prepared us for. Paul's intent here is to encourage us with an understanding of this purpose. It is something to look forward to.

So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, (verse 6)

We are supposed to take *courage* from this. Other translations use the phrase *always confident*.⁷ This is hardly compatible with a pending review of our sins or receiving rebuke for everything done, undone or said. Considering my own failures, this leaves me little confidence. It makes me want to stay right where I am as long as possible.

The word *always confident* is intriguing. Why would we be *always confident* if from time to time we think of impending judgment for the bad things remaining in our lives?

If in our lifetime we are accused by the law of a crime, do we look forward to the trial with *longing*? Whatever the word *evil* means in verse 10, it cannot refer to judgment for sin. It is a judgment for something, but not that.

What does *receive* mean?

What is it that we will receive from the Lord for *evil* done in our body? Will we be rebuked or shamed privately or publically? According to some, the answer is yes.

That interpretation presents a problem. Nothing in 2Corinthians 5:10 says what we will receive from the Lord for the *evil*. In fact, nowhere does the New Testament suggest we will receive *any* punishment when the Lord returns.

The context after verse 10

All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; (verse 18)

Picture two men in a dispute. One accuses the other of wrongdoing. Through an intermediary they become reconciled. Not half reconciled. Fully reconciled. By definition, reconciled means there is no need to review the case.

When a case is settled out of court, it means the two parties are no longer in dispute. Neither party has a claim on the other. So it is with us and God.

God has given us the ministry of reconciliation. What does that entail? What are we to say to people if reconciliation includes a future judgment for sin or faults? Shall we tell them the reconciliation is only temporary but they will nonetheless stand in judgment later? Is that good news?

... that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation (verse 19).

Whatever the word *evil* means in verse 10, it cannot refer to our *trespasses* because God does not count them against us. To what purpose and on what grounds will he review them in heaven? To make us feel bad? Why?

The context of verse 10 shows that our appearing before the Lord is something we look forward to with such longing that we groan for it. God does not hold our trespasses against us because the reconciliation accomplished through Christ is complete. It cannot mean therefore a reckoning for past sins or even a review of forgiven transgressions. That does not fit with a genuine reconciliation or with God not *counting* our trespasses against us.

Two possible interpretations

What then could the word *evil* include in verse 10?

1Corinthians 3

The most likely interpretation could be that he meant what he said in 1Corinthians 3; reward for work done God's way versus loss of reward for work done in ways that God did not command.

2Corinthians 13

Paul may be showing doubt as to the salvation of some of the members of the Corinthian church. This is suggested in 2Corinthians 13:5. The contrast between good and evil in 2Corinthians 5:10 may mean a separation of sheep from goats.

Summary

Neither the use of the word *evil* in 2Corinthians 5:10 nor the context supports convincingly the view that Christians will face a review of remaining sins.

Conclusion

For what will believers be judged? Works done for God his way and the motives for doing them. Chapters 3 and 4 of 1Corinthians summarize this.

The doctrine of justification, being declared righteous through faith in Christ apart from works, excludes by its very definition any judgment on Christians for sin. This allows us to look forward to the Second Coming as our *blessed hope* and to anticipate God's presence *with great joy*.

Although we are aware of our remaining corruption, we are called to live a life free from sin consciousness, unless the Lord brings specific sins to our attention. This allows us to come to God in prayer with *a true heart in full assurance of faith* because we have Jesus as our high priest who made it possible to approach that throne of grace with confidence.

This is living by grace as opposed to law. We live with our eyes on Jesus and his grace, not on our degree of perfection because we trust God's promise to finish our sanctification *completely*.

Readers may also enjoy Smalling's book, [Joyfully Justified](#).

Endnotes

¹ Being made righteous is a process throughout life called *sanctification*. See my book [Joyfully Justified](#) for a scriptural explanation of these definitions.

² Romans Chapter 4 shows this.

³ The verb in the original Greek involved in the clause *having been justified*, is in the aorist tense which means a finished past event. If it were a repeated event, it would be in another tense designed for that.

⁴ In recent years two heretics, Norman Shepherd and the Anglican theologian N.T. Wright have proposed such a view, which has since been rejected by all conservative reformed denominations. It is called the *New Pauline Perspective*. It is neither new nor Pauline.

⁵ Berkhof, Louis. Systematic Theology, Eerdmann's Publishing, Grand Rapids Michigan, 1932, P.732

⁶ That word is HAMARTIA and means nothing else but *sin*.

⁷ NIV, KJV