

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Last Judgment
November 11, 2018
Sermon by Pastor Justin Gran
What's the verdict?

—Hebrews 9:24-28

Full disclosure: I have never been arrested. I have never been charged with a felony or a misdemeanor (there may have been one or two traffic violations, but the charges didn't stick). I have never been tried or prosecuted. I have never had to stand before a judge in a court of law. So I have never had to sweat it out, waiting for the gavel to drop, wondering "What's the verdict?"

Whether you're familiar with the courtroom scene or not, the time will come for each of you to go to court, in a sense. And in this courtroom appearance, you are not merely an observer or witness. You are not the plaintiff. You are on trial. You are standing before the Judge waiting for his judgment. For we are ***"destined to die once and after that, to face judgment."*** This courtroom appearance is not merely hypothetical or imaginary. It's real. It is as unavoidable as death itself because all are ***destined to die once and after that, to face judgment.*** What will God's courtroom be like?

God's courtroom is quite different from the courts in our land. First of all, you will not receive a court summons ahead of time with a date and time. No one knows the day or time with Christ will return as the judge over all the earth, nor do we know the exact day on which we will die and after that face judgment. But it's happening.

Another difference in God's courtroom is that there will not be a host of witnesses called to the stand to testify against you. However, your own conscience testifies against you. If it's not too dull, it should be able to give a pretty accurate witness to all your infractions against God's law.

What is the evidence in God's courtroom? If you have ever received one of those photo enforcement violations in the mail, you know what it's like to be confronted with evidence. You open up the letter and it has concrete evidence against you. It has a picture of the front and back of your car, your license plate, and it even has a picture of you driving. Then it has a diagram of the intersection and a hard red line, and it shows your vehicle clearly crossing the line. God doesn't send us documentation of our every violation against him in the mail. The only documentation he needs is written in his word. It's like he draws a hard red line with his law showing us that we have crossed it many times. Each time you've said something you shouldn't have, that's a transgression—crossing the line. Each time you've done something, or even thought something evil, deceitful, harmful, careless, it's stepping out of bounds; it's trespassing against a Holy God, the judge himself.

So, what do you do? In an earthly court of law, there are options to mitigate the outcome, right. Some might try to represent themselves and argue their case. But that usually doesn't work. If a person has certain means, they may be able to hire a legal team that can find some sort of loophole, or at the very least whittle down the sentence to a mere slap on the wrist. But in God's courtroom, any attempt to defend our selves will be silenced. Jesus the Judge will not accept any pleas of ignorance. Your "Good" behavior might mitigate your sentence in a court of law on this side of heaven, but not in God's courtroom. There's no 1-800-LAST-DAY hotline you can dial up that will find some sort of legal loophole. In the very next chapter in Hebrews, the writer tells us like it is, ***"it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."*** We will all be summoned before the living God. He is both the plaintiff and the judge. But don't worry! He's fair. If you've done good always, if you've never sinned, you have nothing to worry about. But who of us can honestly say that?

So what's the verdict, then? It's guilty! Guilty as charged. Picture a defendant, shackled and ushered into court by a bailiff. You've seen that at least on TV, right. Picture it: A man accused of grievous crimes stood there with his head hung in agony because he knew what the verdict is going to be. There were countless observers waiting to hear the verdict. The gavel dropped and because the judge is fair, he threw the whole book at him. He punished him to the fullest extent of the Law. The Judge didn't cut him any slack. He sentenced him to death, even though it was his very own Son whose life was hanging in the balance.

Of course, I'm talking about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was declared guilty and sentenced to death for you. Consider this: Who exactly declared Jesus guilty, and who exactly sentenced him to death? It's true; the Jewish leaders falsely accused Jesus of just one sin—blasphemy. But ultimately it was God the Father who considered his own Son to be guilty of not just one sin, but the sins of the world. And certainly it was Pontius Pilate who sentenced him to death. As we confess in the creed, he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, but remember whose authority Pontius Pilate was ultimately under. It was ultimately God who sentenced Jesus to

death on the cross, because he is just. That is the payment he required for all the times you would cross the line of God's holy law. It's as though God's gavel was dropping against Jesus as they hammered nails into Jesus' hands and feet. Jesus, who is true God and also true man, fell into the hands of the living God. He faced the brunt of his wrath in your place; as a sacrifice made on your behalf.

The writer to the Hebrews gives us another illustration. In addition to the modern courtroom scene we have an ancient illustration from the Old Testament. He takes us back to the Tabernacle, where on a daily basis the priest would perform sacrifices and enter the tabernacle. And then on a yearly basis the priest would offer a sacrifice on behalf of his sins and the sins of the people and then enter the Most Holy Place, which was like God's throne room. The point of the picture throughout the Old Testament was that the only way to gain access and good standing with God would be by blood. But what Jesus did, isn't just symbolic. It was the real deal. **"For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence."** Jesus didn't offer a symbolic sacrifice and enter a man-made replica that only symbolized God's presence and holiness. He sacrificed himself. And God accepted that sacrifice when he raised him back to life. And Jesus ascended into heaven to appear for us in God's presence.

Let's go back to court for a moment to understand what exactly it means that Jesus **"entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence."** In God's courtroom, we have an advocate; we have legal representation; we have a defense attorney with an airtight case in our favor. Jesus Christ appears in court on our behalf and he is good at what he does. None of the charges that could be brought against us sticks. That mountain of evidence pointing to our guilt is no longer admissible. Jesus, our defense lawyer, is able to silence even the accusation of our own consciences. He pleads our case on our behalf. So what's the verdict? For you, the verdict is not guilty. The living God whom we have offended, whose lines we've crossed, actually declares us innocent, not guilty. Because Christ **"has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment,"²⁸ so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people.** How could any charge against us stick as long as Jesus is our defense? How could God condemn us for sins that were already punished in Jesus Christ? They are done away with. God has spoken. He calls it like it is. Your sins are forgiven through faith in Jesus Christ. By Jesus' sacrifice and through faith in him, you are declared not guilty. That's the verdict.

Remember that and hold onto that as the day approaches. For we are still **"destined to die once, and after that face judgment."** Knowing that we will be summoned along with everyone else to face Jesus our judge, take to heart and believe the verdict that God has already made in Jesus Christ. That's the only way you will be able to stand before God on Judgment Day and live. It would be arrogant and very foolish to head into God's courtroom on your own without the proper defense. If we were to take Jesus and his forgiveness for granted, and stroll into God's courtroom thinking, "I've got this! I'll represent myself. I'll build a case on all the praiseworthy things I've done in this life." That would be a dreadful thing. If we were to mistake God's pardon as permission to remain in sin all the days of our life, then there is no sacrifice left for sin; only judgment, and that's a dreadful thing. So hang onto Jesus and the not-guilty verdict he has declared. Stand on him alone and his promise of forgiveness because **Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.**

Waiting for Jesus to come again, doesn't have to be like waiting on the edge of your seat, wondering "what's the verdict?" You know what the verdict is! Waiting for Jesus means believing in him. It means you know that this present life and suffering will be done away with. Waiting for Jesus is like waiting for a friend to come and pick you up when you need it the most. He's coming. Yes, he comes to judge. But for those who are waiting for him, he brings salvation. Just wait. Amen.