**Saint Peter Damian’s *Letter* 21**

On The Last Judgment[[1]](#endnote-1)

*Now then, when we arrive at that last judgment to be hauled before the bench of the judge who cannot be deceived by the concealment of crimes, nor corrupted by some bribe to win impunity; when he begins to reveal all secrets and display not only our deeds and our words, but also our very thoughts, what will we do in the presence of the majesty of such a judge?*

**Introduction**

To Sir B(onushomo), the most prudent judge, from the monk Peter the Sinner, the bond of fraternal love.

(2) I am aware that when my letter gets into the hands of secular grammarians, they at once try to discover whether it contains the grace of an artistic style or the luster of rhetorical elegance, and they search carefully for a necessarily deceptive chain of syllogisms and enthymemes. Indeed, they look for the knowledge that breeds conceit and do not admire the love that builds,[[2]](#endnote-2) yet according to Solomon: “The sayings of the servants of God must be like goads, and like nails driven home.”[[3]](#endnote-3) And hence these sayings are properly compared to nails and goads, because they usually prick the life of carnal men with sharp invective, and do not caress it improperly with the seductive ointment of soothing adulation. And so Christ is my literature, he for men’s sake became man, and thus my letter is able to exude only that fragrance which promotes the edification of my brothers.

(3) Wherefore, my dear brother, while the world still smiles on you and you are still in good health, while earthly prosperity favors you, think about those things that will follow all this, and, as if the present were already past, this is what your prudence ought carefully to ponder, namely, what things are to succeed the present in time to come. With your closest attention consider all things transitory as having already passed away, and regard them as you would a deceptive and illusive dream. Your thoughts should revert to this point and should be carefully focused on the fact that whatever will happen later cannot pass away. What is more, you should now place before your eyes the terrible day of the last judgment, and consider in fear and trembling the suddenness of the coming of God’s great majesty. Nor should you think that this day will be long in coming, since the prophet proclaimed it to be ready at hand for an age long before us, as if it were already at the door: “The greats day of the Lord is near, it is near, and comes with speed; the voice of the day of the Lord is bitter, there the warrior will be afflicted. That day is a day of wrath, a day of anguish and affliction, a day of calamity and misery, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of fog and whirlwind, a day of trumpet and battlecry.”[[4]](#endnote-4)

(4) Weigh carefully, my dear friend, with what severity the prophet sees this last day of judgment, growing in bitterness about the hearts of the damned, an event he was hardly able to express with all his descriptive terms. For even if we were now to be silent regarding the pains of eternal damnation that will never end, and were only to examine the terror and the horror of this last day, the entire false and deceitful happiness of this world would be seen as mud and worthless seaweed lying on the shore. Who is not terrified, who is not shaken to his very roots by that statement of the Lord himself in the Gospel: “Like lightning flashing from the east as far as the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be.”[[5]](#endnote-5) Who, I say, does not experience great fear when Truth itself again says: “The sun will be darkened, the moon will not give her light, the stars will fall from the sky, and the celestial powers will be shaken.”[[6]](#endnote-6) Of this day Peter also speaks: “But the Day of the Lord will come unexpectedly, as a thief. On that day the heavens will disappear with a great rushing sound, the elements will disintegrate in flames.”[[7]](#endnote-7) And again he says: “The present heavens and earth, again by God’s word, have been kept in store for burning; they are being reserved until the day of judgment when the godless will be destroyed.”[[8]](#endnote-8) And so the apostle Jude also says: “Behold, the Lord will come with his myriads of angels, to bring all men to judgment and to convict the godless of all the impious deeds they have committed, and of all the defiant words which wicked sinners have spoken against him.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

(5) O, if only our heart could savor the bitterness found in the words of John: “Behold, He is coming with the clouds! Every eye shall see him, and also those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the world shall lament in remorse.”[[10]](#endnote-10) Then will those who now live fearlessly shake with fear, then will those who now rest peacefully in the luxury of carnal pleasures find their whole being filled with bitterness. Shedding bloody tears, they will start saying to the mountains, “Fall on us,” and to the hills, “cover us.”[[11]](#endnote-11)

Saint Peter Damian then gives us a Scriptural description of the Second Coming of Christ:

(6) There will then be no place to which one can flee, there will be no refuge where one can hide, for then the gates of hell will be thrown open, our enemy death will be destroyed, and dust that had decayed, namely human flesh will come to life as it hears the sound of the trumpet. Now will all those whom the earth has received, whom the waters swallowed, whom devouring flames have consumed, all will be given up by that to which we were consigned, and will be restored to life without any reduction of their former selves. For then will the earth be shaken, the air will be disturbed by sudden storms, thunder will crash and lightning flashes will terrify the hearts of men. “Our God will come and reveal himself; our God will not keep silence. Before him fires will burn, and round about a mighty storm will wreathe him. He will summon heaven on high and earth to the judgment of his people.”[[12]](#endnote-12)

(7) On that dreadful day he will appear with his angels and archangels, with thrones and dominations, with principalities and powers,[[13]](#endnote-13) with the heavens flashing and the earth aflame, and with all the elements moved with terror in obedience to him. Isaiah, the most celebrated of the prophets, well describes this day when he says: “Behold, this hopeless Day of the Lord is coming, this day of wrath and fury, to make the land a desolation and exterminate sinners from it. The stars of heaven shall give no light, the sun shall be darkened at its rising, and the moon will not give forth its light. I will bring disaster upon the world and upon the wicked for their sins, and I will destroy the violence of the wicked and will bring low the haughtiness of the proud. And those who are left will be more precious than gold assayed by fire, and man will be more precious than a sapphire. Then the heavens will shutter, and the earth will be shaken to its foundation at the furious anger of the Lord of Hosts, on the day his anger will fall upon it.”[[14]](#endnote-14) The prophet Malachi also speaks in similar words: “Behold, the Lord almighty will come, and who will endure the day of his coming? Or who can bear the sight of him? For he will enter like the refiner’s fire, and the chaff of the winnowers, and he will sit, refining and purifying gold and silver.”[[15]](#endnote-15)

(9) … When, therefore, these events begin to happen, the gates of the heavens will certainly be opened, or rather, the heavens themselves will be removed as if the flaps of a tent were being drawn, so that they might be restored or transformed into something better. **Then fear and apprehension will grip all things, all will begin to tremble when he comes in judgment who needs no witness, who seeks no evidence, who requires no attorneys.** But with all these put aside, he judges deeds and words and thoughts and places them before us, and if they were displayed in writing, holds them up in the sight of those who committed them and of others who are present. How deeply will every creature then be shaken and be afraid. Hence Isaiah says, “For the Lord has a day of vengeance, Zion a year when it will requite, and its torrents shall be turned into blazing pitch, which night and day shall never be quenched.”[[16]](#endnote-16) All of this blessed Job also describes when he says: “A land of gloom, a land shrouded in the darkness of death, a land of misery and obscurity and the shadow of death, a place of disorder where everlasting horror dwells.”[[17]](#endnote-17) And the prophet also adds: “And they shall come out,” he says, “and see the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worms shall not die nor their fire be quenched.”[[18]](#endnote-18)

Saint Peter Damian then reveals the lament of the damned:

(10) What can be said or imagined that is more horrible than to be subjected to the wounds of damnation, and the pain from these wounds that will never end? And so the prophet says, “They have gone down to hell with their weapons.”[[19]](#endnote-19) The weapons of sinners are those parts of the body by which the evil desires that they have conjured up are carried out. So, to go down to hell with their weapons means to suffer the torments of eternal fire together with their bodily members by which they fulfilled the desires of the flesh. Paul also adds: “When our Lord Jesus Christ is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in blazing fire, then he will do justice upon those who refuse to acknowledge God and upon those who will not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. They will suffer the punishment of eternal ruin, cut off from the presence of the Lord and the splendid of his might.”[[20]](#endnote-20) And again: “A kind of terrifying expectation of judgment and a fierce fire which will consume God’s enemies.”[[21]](#endnote-21)

The reader will note the emphasis that Peter Damian puts not only on our deeds and words, but on our very thoughts that will be revealed and judged:

(11) Now then, when we arrive at that last judgment to be hauled before the bench of the judge who cannot be deceived by the concealment of crimes, nor corrupted by some bribe to win impunity; when he begins to reveal all secrets and display not only our deeds and our words, but also our very thoughts, what will we do in the presence of the majesty of such a judge? What excuse can we offer? With what kind of defense can we clear ourselves? What sort of repentance can assist us, since when we were still in the flesh, we held repentance in contempt? Which good works will protect us, since there were none in this life that we performed? To which apostles or to which other saint can we turn for protection, whose words and example we despised? Perhaps some bodily weakness will excuse them. But the example of all the saints will cry out against such an excuse, who while alive conquered the weakness of the flesh, demonstrating that what they did we also could do, especially since it was not by their own strength that they resisted sin, but by the help of a merciful God. For God both showed himself to those who were not seeking him that he might be sought and believed, and defended with his invincible protection those who believed in him that they would not be overwhelmed by sin.

What answer will they give if the Lord said to them: “If you were able, why did you not resist the allurements of sin? If you were not able , why did you not seek my help against sin. Or when you were wounded, why did you not use the remedy for your wound by doing penance?” Will they not be silent at these objections? Whatever excuse they may give, he will say to those who are found wanting: “Bind them hand and foot; turn them out into the dark, the place of wailing and grinding of teeth.”[[22]](#endnote-22) It follows, then, that they who are here rejoiced in gluttony will there be grinding their teeth. …

(13) It follows that whoever now longs for earthly pleasures, whoever feasts on the desires of lustful flesh will then be consumed by eternal fire and wasted by the sword of divine fury. … There he will no longer be able to obtain from God what he asks, if here he was unwilling to listen to his commands. For they who in this life despised the word of God, will then not be heard when in false humility they come to the door with their requests. But he will say to them: “I do not know you. Depart from me, you cursed, to the eternal fire that has been prepared for the devil and his angels.”[[23]](#endnote-23)

(14) In whom, therefore, can we trust in what can we hope to attain salvation? Can it be in the hoard of money we have hidden in a safe place? Can it be in affluence which is empty within, and which outwardly we possess improperly. But listen to the apostle James, telling us how much riches profit a man, and what value he attaches to the possession of worldly things. “Well then, you have great possessions,” he says, “weep and wail over the miserable fate descending on you. Your riches have rotted; your fine clothes are moth-eaten; your silver and gold have rusted away, and their rust will be evidence against you and consume your flesh like fire. You have piled up wrath for yourselves in the final days.”[[24]](#endnote-24) And a little further on: “You have feasted wantonly on the earth and in luxury you have nourished yourselves to your heart’s desire.”[[25]](#endnote-25)

(15) Let this unhappy man go on now, weakly yielding to the current of carnal desires, and later the fiery pit of hellfire like the plague will swallow him; let him now arrogantly exalt himself with the symbols of pride, that he may then live undying, confined by eternal death. What will it profit him if today he belches after stuffing himself in feasting, and tomorrow goes down to hell, poor and naked? Alas, alas, what will these wretched men say when they see that they have irreparably lost their temporal goods and when everlasting evils unavoidably await them? **What will they think when they become aware that the acceptable time and the day of salvation[[26]](#endnote-26) have vanished, and the time is at hand when they cannot perform good deeds, and they are unable to find a remedy for their damnation? How bitter will be their conscience, how tearful will be their lament!** …

(16) My dear friend, I place before you not my own words, but selections from Sacred Scripture for this reason: so that even though in your judgment you rightly distain my rustic speech, you would not deem it improper to listen to the divinely inspired testimony of the saints. Therefore, my dear brother, treasure up in your mind these and many other arguments of Holy Scripture, which, among the false riches of the world, are able to produce in you a salutary fear. For as Solomon says: “Happy the man who is always accompanied by fear, but he who hardens his heart falls into misfortune.”[[27]](#endnote-27) For, as we read, no one can correct him whom God has despised.”[[28]](#endnote-28) Man, indeed, speaks to another to no effect if God through himself does not inwardly speak to him.

But you , my dear brother, in keeping with the talent for prudence which God has given to you, examine your life with great subtleness, always hold up your deeds before your eyes, fear the judgment of God, and with full precaution look about you in all directions, so that when the judge arrives he will not find you asleep but on guard, not among the foolish, but among the wise virgins.[[29]](#endnote-29)

As you are now the judge of your own deeds, may you later not need to be judged, and then you will never need to be afraid, since now you have never ceased to fear.

(17) But since I can perhaps be of greater assistance to you by my prayers to God than by preaching to you, may almighty God in his mercy direct you now, dear brother, on the way to justice, and on that fearful day of judgment grant that you may be among the elect who stand at his right side. Amen.

1. Peter Damian Letters 1-30, translated by Owen J. Blum, O.F.M., *The Fathers of the Church*, Mediaeval Continuation, Catholic University of America Press, Washington, D.C., 1989, pp. 197-207. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Cf. 1 Cor 8.1. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Eccl 12.11. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Zeph 1.14-16. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Mt 24.27. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Mt 24.29. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. 2 Pet 3.10. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. 2 Pet 3.7. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Jude 1.14-15. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Rev 1.7. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Lk 23.30; cf. Rev 6.16 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Ps 49.3-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Cf. Col 1.16. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Is 13.9-13. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Mal 3.1-3. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Is 34.8-10. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Job 10.21. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Is 66.24. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Ezek 32.27. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. 2 Thess 1.7-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Heb 10.27. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Mt 22.13. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Mt 25.12.41. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Jas 5.1-3. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Jas 5-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Cf. 2 Cor 6.2. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Prov 28.14. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Cf. Eccl 7.14. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Cf.1 Cor 11.31-32; Mt 25.1-13. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)