

The Last Judgment and Life's True Worth
by Sam Zeeman

Is life worth living? Ancient and contemporary society have continually revolved around this fundamental question. Despite its significance, the answer has been lost in an intricate web of moral and spiritual struggles that shape human understanding of purpose and meaning. The Museum of Fine Arts and Contemporary Arts presents Frans Francken's (1581-1642) *The Last Judgment* as one of the most compelling works that explores this theme. The innate struggle to find meaning in a world full of uncertainty is visually depicted in this painting. *The Last Judgment* compellingly answers the question of whether life is worth living by weaving together a complex narrative of morality, suffering, and divine justice. This thesis is evident in three ways. First, the painting depicts life as a moral test, where human actions determine whether one ascends to heaven or is condemned to hell. Second, *The Last Judgment* illustrates how suffering serves as both a warning against sin and a motivation to seek redemption by contrasting damnation with salvation. Third, Francken presents Christ as the ultimate judge highlighting that life is governed by divine justice, affirming that human existence has meaning and purpose.

The first reason that *The Last Judgment* provides insight into life's worth is its depiction of life as a moral test, where human actions directly determine one's eternal fate. Francken, a Flemish Baroque painter active in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, brings the moral dimension of human existence to the forefront ("Frans Francken the Younger").

His detailed style, characteristic of the Flemish Baroque, emphasizes realism, dramatic contrasts of light and shadow, and vivid textures (“Baroque Art and Architecture”).

Francken’s depiction of the division between the saved and the damned draws from Christian Doctrine, which emphasizes personal responsibility in the face of divine judgment (Conway). As Romans 14:12 states, "So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God" (New International Version). The viewer is confronted with a scene where every action, every decision, is scrutinized by divine law.

Francken’s *The Last Judgment* reflects the belief that moral choices have eternal consequences. He invites viewers to consider how their actions shape their fate, using stark contrasts between heaven and hell to emphasize the importance of virtue. By presenting angels and demons, Francken symbolizes the ongoing struggle between good and evil. This reinforces the idea that life is a moral battlefield. This depiction suggests that life is worth living because each decision carries meaning, urging individuals to live with purpose and integrity as they shape their eternal destiny.

The second reason that *The Last Judgment* addresses life’s worth is its dramatic contrast between the horrors of damnation and the hope of salvation. Francken’s use of a contrasting imagery between suffering in hell and the serenity in heaven highlights the duality of human existence. The tortured souls in torment stand in direct opposition to the peaceful figures ascending to heaven. This division serves as both a warning and a motivation for viewers to seek redemption, emphasizing the importance of human choices in determining the fate of one’s soul.

Francken’s depiction of suffering and salvation can be likened to the process of a blacksmith forging a sword. The raw metal, rough and unformed, is subjected to fire and relentless hammering. Each strike of the hammer is painful, each flame burns away imperfections. Yet, through this ordeal, the metal is transformed into something strong and

refined. If left untouched, it would remain weak and brittle, never reaching its full potential. In the same way, the torments depicted in *The Last Judgment* serve as both a consequence of moral failure and a call to transformation. The suffering souls, much like unshaped metal, represent those who fail to learn from life's hardships, while the redeemed, who emerge purified into heaven, symbolize those who have embraced virtue and sought redemption.

The horrors of hell depicted in *The Last Judgment* reflect the consequences of immoral behavior, while the depiction of heaven offers a vision of peace and fulfillment for the virtuous. These realms not only represent destinations but also mirror the spiritual journey shaped by one's choices. Francken portrays salvation as more than just a hopeful vision for the afterlife, it is a framework for understanding the significance of moral decisions in the present life. The contrast between these realms forces the viewer to contemplate the value of their own existence. Life is worth living not only because of the hope of salvation but also because every action either brings one closer to or further from divine peace. In this sense, the painting suggests that suffering can be avoided, and that hope remains for those who choose to pursue virtue. The possibility of salvation gives life purpose, meaning, and direction.

The third reason that *The Last Judgment* examines life's worth is the presence of Christ as the ultimate judge, reinforcing that life is governed by divine justice. Francken, in keeping with the Flemish Baroque tradition, skillfully presents Christ as the central figure in *The Last Judgment*. Christ is shown seated at the top of the composition, casting his judgment over all below him. This composition is not only a stylistic choice but also strengthens the central message of the painting: human life is under divine scrutiny.

By positioning Christ as the judge, Francken's work aligns with Christian beliefs that life has a higher meaning, governed by a divine order that transcends earthly existence. This concept is mirrored by René Descartes' (1596-1650) *Meditations on First Philosophy*, where

he argues that ultimate truth and order are established by a divine being (12-19). Descartes' philosophy suggests that human life is part of a grand, divinely orchestrated plan, rather than a random sequence of events (12-19, 23-25). Similarly, St. Augustine (354-430), in *The City of God*, contends that the true purpose of human life is found within God's eternal plan (771). Augustine emphasizes that all things, including human actions, are part of God's unchanging will, which was established from eternity.

In *The Last Judgment*, Christ embodies this divine order, emphasizes that life is shaped by a higher authority and that our choices have eternal significance. Christ's judgment reflects the Christian belief in the importance of living according to God's will. As John 14:15 states, "If you love me, keep my commands" (New International Version). This divine order structures life, illustrating that human actions matter not only in the present but also in the eyes of a higher power. By framing life under divine justice, Francken affirms that existence has inherent value, measured not by worldly standards but by divine law. Just as Descartes contends that life's meaning is grounded in alignment with a higher power, Francken's work underscores that each life is eternally significant.

In conclusion, *The Last Judgment* provides an answer to one of life's most fundamental questions: life is worth living. Firstly, the painting suggests that life serves as a moral test, where human actions determine one's eternal fate. Secondly, *The Last Judgment* shows how suffering both warns against sin and encourages redemption by contrasting damnation with salvation. Finally, by depicting Christ as the ultimate judge, Francken emphasizes that life is ruled by divine justice and confirms the meaning and purpose of human existence. In its vivid portrayal, he captures the essence of life's moral struggle and ultimate redemption. Through this artwork, life's purpose is clear. It is not merely to exist, but to live with purpose and integrity, for our choices echo through eternity.

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