

The Gospel According to God's Judgment: Judgment as Salvation

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When I introduce the topic of God's judgment, I regularly ask my audience: "What is your first reaction, thought, or feeling when you hear that God will judge you?" I have addressed this question on all continents (except Antarctica) to people of various political, social, religious, ethnic, educational, and age backgrounds, and the answer is always unanimous: "Fear!" In the past, I thought that it was mainly my problem, because I grew up in a totalitarian communist regime; and when I heard the word *judgment*, I immediately imagined a judge in dark clothing, with a severe expression on his face, pointing at someone with his finger, and condemning that person to death. However, I have found that everywhere people's impressions about the divine judgment are remarkably dark and extremely cold. They think that God is like a heavenly policeman waiting for their mistakes in order to punish them and perceive Him as a cosmic Nebuchadnezzar before whose sovereign authority nobody can escape. They feel that they are under the magnifying glass of the heavenly Judge, and thus are full of anxiety. The thought of coming under the judgment of God brings goose-bumps.

My distorted understanding was grossly influenced by some preachers who used divine judgment as a "pedagogical tool" to motivate believers to obedience, "encourage" them to be good, and behave nicely. They thought that scaring and threatening people with judgment would help them to

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follow God faithfully (contrary to Rom 2:4!).¹ They built their concept on a mistranslation of Jude 23: "Through fear lead others to salvation" (as some old translations have it),² and presented the divine judgment in full negativity. These interpretations were like beating me with an iron rod. This troubled me deeply; and from my childhood on, I had a bleak and unfriendly picture of judgment which played a dreadful role in my mind. As a result, I was afraid of God, frightened by Him, and naked before His expecting eyes. I felt lost, alone, and abandoned with an acute sense of guilt. I perceived nothing favorable in God's judgment.

Fear as a universal human reaction toward divine judgment is understandable, because we know that God is holy (Lev 11:44-45; 19:2; 1 Pet 1:15-16), a consuming fire (Isa 30:27), and we are sinners (Ps 51:5; Eccl 7:20; Jer 17:9; Rom 3:23; 1 John 1:8). Consequently, we cannot possibly stand before the awesome Judge of the whole Universe (Gen 18:25; Judg 11:27; 2 Tim 4:8).³ Our typical response is aptly described by Asaph: "Who can stand before you . . . ? From heaven you pronounced judgment, and the land feared and was quiet" (Ps 76:7b-8a; see also Judg 13:22; Isa 6:3-5). At the bottom of our negative thoughts lies the conviction of our insufficiency and sinfulness.

According to popular understanding, to judge means to "condemn, punish, and destroy." This is why people are scared, full of anxiety, and try to avoid even talking about it. When people equate God's judgment with condemnation, punishment, and destruction (and such meaning can clearly

¹ "Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance" (Rom 2:4)? Biblical quotations are from the NIV unless otherwise noted.

² For example, the Kralicka Bible (Czech translation from the year 1613) and the Russian translation of 1876 translate it thus. Similarly, another 760

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be attested to in the Bible),⁴ no wonder they do not experience joy and assurance of salvation in Christ Jesus. This threat of divine judgment robs them of thankfulness, and their world is divided between the redemption secured on the cross and the fear of God's judgment. Thus, they live in a spiritual schizophrenia which is a serious problem. On the one hand, they know that they are saved in Jesus Christ, but on the other hand, they understand that there will be a judgment (Rom 14:10; 2 Cor 5:10; 2 Tim 4:1; Heb 9:27; 10:30). They do not know how to put these two realities together, and they lose peace and certitude. Are fear and hopelessness something which undividedly belong to the concept of judgment? Are uncertainty and soberness its necessary companions?

While carefully studying the Holy Scriptures, I had to unlearn this wrong imagery of God's judgment. These

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that for the biblical authors the divine judgment is something that is desired and to which they looked forward with great anticipation: "Raise up, O God, judge the earth" (Ps 82:6). Judgment plays a vital role in God's plan of salvation, and it is a central part of the eternal Gospel (Rom 2:16; Rev 14:6-7).⁶ Hamilton powerfully reasons that "the center of biblical theology . . . is the glory of God in salvation through judgement."⁷ If that is so, the basic question is, therefore, what is the primary meaning of God's judgment? Four answers are provided.

1. To Judge Means to Justify

According to biblical understanding, "to judge" means "to justify" which is a legal action with an awesome impact on our lives.⁸ Every time we confess our sins and are forgiven, we pass through God's eschatological

cases (like Lev 10:1-2; 2 Sam 6:6-7; 2 Kgs 2:23-24; Acts 5:3-11; 12:21-24) and the last judgment (Rev 20:7-10) are purely negative judgments (but the radical eradication of evil brings positive results). God saves repentant people but also punishes sin (Exod 20:5-6; 34:6-7). These two fundamental characteristics of God constitute an indissoluble, inseparable, and paradoxical unit.

⁶ See my article "Toward a Biblical Theology of God's Judgment: A Celebration of the Cross in Seven Phases of Divine Universal Judgment (An Overview of a Theocentric-Christocentric Approach)," *Journal of Addgæconsfes-*

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judgment which breaks through to our situation, and we are justified by His grace, i.e., declared just. Judgment is justification: God as a true Judge justifies repentant sinners (Rom 3:22-26; 5:6-11), and we are cleansed and acquitted from all guilt (Ps 51:1-2; Isa 6:7; Zech 3:4). He does that and can do it, because He is our heavenly Judge! In this way, for example, Abraham was judged by God and pronounced righteous because he believed in Him (Gen 15:6); and Joshua, the high priest, was proclaimed right (Zech 3:3-5). Isaiah boldly declares: “But in the Lord all the descendants of Israel will be found righteous and will exult” (45:25). In this way, to judge means “to cleanse” (Ps 51:7-10; Job 4:17; Isa 1:18; Dan 8:14),⁹ and the justified sinners stand in a restored and right relationship with their Lord. This positive proclamation of God on our behalf gives full assurance of salvation, new courage to live, brings true peace, and jubilant joy into our lives.

David joyfully states: “Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him and in whose spirit there is no deceit” (Ps 32:1-2). This is why Paul unambiguously clarifies: “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1)! Jesus plainly assures: “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life” (John 5:24). The forgiven transgressor does not come into the judgment of condemnation and will not experience God’s disapproval.¹⁰ Consequently, Paul announces that those who truly accept

⁹ David P. Wright renders the *hapax legomenon* Hebrew *nifal* verb *nitsdaq* of Dan 8:14 with “be purified” (David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* [New York: Doubleday, 1992] 6:729).

¹⁰ The key phrase in this verse, “will not be condemned,” can be translated in a different way: “shall not come into judgment” (NKJV). The ambiguous Greek term *krisis* is intentionally used here with a double meaning in order to allude to two complementary terms (i.e., condemnation and judgment) which are both correct. Those who believe in Christ will not be condemned at any judgment (Rom 8:1; 14:10; 2 Cor 5:10), and they will not come to the last judgment of condemnation of the wicked because at that time the righteous will already be inhabitants of the New Jerusalem (see Rev 20:7-21:4).

Consider also the sequence of events in Jesus’ speech: (1) preaching of the Gospel: “hearing”; (2) positive response: “believing”; (3) results for the believer: (a) He/she has eternal life (note the present tense)! (b) He/she does not come to judgment (is not condemned)! (c) He/she passes from death to eternal life!

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Jesus as their personal Savior are raised to new life and are already sitting on the heavenly throne in Christ at the right side of the heavenly Father (Eph 2:6; 1:20)!¹¹ Thus, if we are already there, why are we so worried if we will make it into heaven one day?! Not one of our performances (however noble), great achievements, or good deeds can help us get into the kingdom of glory.¹² We receive salvation as a pure gift only through and in Christ!¹³ No wonder authority was given to Him to pronounce judgment (John 3:17-18; 5:22-23, 27, 30; 6:37-40, 44; 8:16; 9:39; compare with Dan 7:13-14), and all glory belongs to Him (Ps 34:2; Jer 9:23-24; 1 Cor 1:29-31; 10:31; Col 1:27; Jude 24-25; Rev 5:12-13).

Additional examples are plentiful and portray this reality in various episodes in the Bible. The first judgment recorded in the Bible is over Adam and Eve after they broke their love and trust relationship with their Creator and ate the forbidden fruit (Gen 3:6). Instead of being destroyed

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situation and defeat Satan (Gen 3:15).¹⁵ When we are in Christ, we are sons and daughters of God and heirs of His kingdom. In Christ we have everything (Gal 3:29; 4:7; Rom 4:13-16; 8:32; 1 John 3:1), and we can entirely wrap ourselves in His divine forgiveness.¹⁶

George Ladd correctly explains: “The doctrine of justification means that God has pronounced the eschatological verdict of acquittal over the man of faith in the present, in advance of the final judgment. . . . Thus the man in Christ is actually righteous, not ethically but forensically, in terms of his relationship to God.”¹⁷ God is just (Deut 32:4; Ps 31:5; 2 Chr 15:3; 2 Thess 1:6; 1 John 1:9); He never perverts His judgment or can be accused of favoritism (Prov 17:15; Acts 10:34-35; Eph 6:9; Col 3:25). He is just while justifying sinners (Rom 3:26; Rev 16:7), because He changes them. God sees in the present what we will become by the power of the Holy Spirit, His mighty word, and His blazing grace. He declares us righteous, because by His amazing grace we will be righteous, our lives will be transformed.¹⁸ We are new creatures in Christ and His grace will grow in us (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15; 1 Cor 3:7; 2 Cor 10:15; Eph 4:13-15; Col 2:19; 1 Pet 2:2; 2 Pet 3:18). Grace is amazing because it changes people and does what we cannot accomplish for ourselves (Rom 7:14-18; Jer 13:23; Isa 64:6; Matt 11:28-30; John 1:12; 3:7; Acts 4:12; Eph 2:4-5; Rom 8:10-11; 1 John 3:1-6). When we pass through God’s acquittal, He justifies us as our Judge and in His eyes we are what we will be.

¹⁵ Afolarin Olutunde Ojewole, “The Seed in Genesis 3:15: An Exegetical and Intertextual Study” (Ph.D. diss., Andrews University, 2003).

¹⁶ Peter Brunner, “The Forgiveness of God and the Judgment of God,” *Word & World* 21, no. 3 (2001): 288. On the importance of forgiveness, see Donald E. Gowan, *The Bible on Forgiveness* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publication, 2010); McConville, 32-38.

¹⁷ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 446.

¹⁸ God’s grace is amazing not only because a sinner like me can be saved, but because His grace is transforming. If His grace were not transforming, then it would not be amazing.

We are changed by beholding Jesus (2 Cor 3:18; Col 3:1-4, 10; Heb 12:2; Phil 2:13), and by the power of His Word and Spirit (Ps 33:6; Ezek 36:26-28; John 3:5; Titus 3:5; 1 Pet 1:23; Jas 1:18).

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2. To Judge Means to Save

God saves believers from the second death,¹⁹ sin, guilt, the power of evil, and gives eternal life. ²⁰dea

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from the power of sin and a complete well-being or healing. The Greek word *soteria* conveys this rich meaning.²⁶

God helps us to understand the nature of God's judgment through the Old Testament book of Judges. What was the primary function of these judges? To condemn, punish, or destroy God's people? On the contrary, judges were sent by God to deliver them from the oppression and devastation of their enemies. They were called to protect, care, save, deliver, and liberate God's people from their foes. They were there pro

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weaker than he is and not by God's argumentation or power. At the end, God accomplishes moral victory when Job's unselfish love, trust, and service are revealed. Ultimately God's love, truth, and justice prevails (Pss 100:5; 101:1; 103:8-11; 117),²⁹ and God is just while justifying sinners (Ps 51:4; Rom 3:4, 26).³⁰ This theodicy is the heart of the spiritual warfare.³¹

John declares that Jesus silenced Satan's accusations because of His victory on the cross. His blood defeated Satan's charge that a loving devotion to God is impossible. Christ's victory is claimed by His followers. He identifies with them (Zech 2:8; Matt 25:40, 45; Acts 9:1-6), so they associate with Him, willingly follow wherever He leads (Rev 14:4), and follow Him faithfully even to the point of death. John reports that he heard a loud voice in heaven which described this reality: "Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death. Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short" (Rev 12:10-12). Satan accuses, but God defends and vindicates (Zech 3:1-4; Dan 12:1; Rom 8:31-39; Heb 7:25).

Additional Examples

I have stressed the positive aspect of divine judgment in order to provide a proper framework and thought pattern about this essential activity of God. In order to explain this affirmative value, I provide additional examples from the Hebrew Bible.

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1. The most elaborate judgment scene in the Hebrew Bible is found in Daniel 7. Verse 22 describes the positive aspect of the heavenly pre-advent judgment (see Dan 7:9-10, 13-14). The Aramaic text literally reads: “Until the Ancient of Days came, and judgment was given for the saints of the Most High.” The special grammatical devise, namely “given for,” contains a preposition *lamed* which is in this context the “lamed of advantage.”³² Thus, the text should be translated more precisely in the following way: “Until the Ancient of Days came and the judgment was pronounced in favor of the saints of the Most High” (translation is mine).³³ What a beautiful picture of God who is for us and never against us! He is doing everything possible to legally secure our place in heaven (John 14:1-3). It is significant that this chapter describes God’s condemnation of the little horn (7:26) only after Daniel presents God’s judgment to His people’s advantage (7:22).

2. David prays: “Judge me, O Lord!” David asks God this on three occasions (Pss 7:8; 26:1; 35:24).³⁴ If judgment mainly has a negative meaning, then, of course, David would never express such a prayer. He is not begging for condemnation

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judgment—we are scared of it. However, through this prayer, God's Word helps us to see judgment in a different light.

3. The Messiah announces the Day of the Lord as a day of great salvation. Isaiah declares that God's vengeance will bring consolation to the mourners of Zion (Isa 61:2-3).

4. Moses in his concluding victorious and prophetic song assures: "The Lord will judge his people and have compassion on his servants when he sees their strength is gone and no one is left, slave or free. . . . Rejoice, O nations, with his people, for he will avenge the blood of his servants" (Deut 32:36, 43).

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people are crying for God's help (Pss 7:1; 27:4-8, 13-14; 28:1-2; 31:1-5; 42:2; 84:1-2; 130:1-8; 142:1-2).

9. When God sends His message of judgment to people, it is a message of grace—an opportunity to repent; see the experience of the Ninevites (Jonah 3:6-10) or Daniel's messages to Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 4:27-33). God does not want people to die as informed sinners. His message has the power to change people, if they are willing to listen, obey, and repent from their arrogance, stubbornness, or indifference (Isa 55:11).

10. The first-class verse in regard to God's positive judgment is Isa 35:4. This is an outstanding message to those who are afraid of judgment. God instructs Isaiah to encourage people: "Say to those with fearful hearts, 'Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.'" This is the news which

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someone needed help, only a judge could intervene and bring solution to the problem (Luke 18:2-8).⁴³

We today associate judgment with fear, but the biblical authors connected judgment with surpassing joy. Consider the verbs in the following biblical passage which describes an attitude toward judgment: "Rejoice . . . be glad . . . resound . . . be jubilant . . . sing for joy . . . sing before the LORD for he comes to judge the earth" (Ps 96:11-13; recited in 1 Chr 16:31-36). Also a psalm of the sons of Korah reiterates: "Mount Zion rejoices, the villages of Judah are glad because of your judgments" (Ps 48:11).

I am convinced that God does not need to organize a judgment in heaven in order to condemn humanity, because we are already condemned to death (we are all sinners, guilty, and doomed to death, and if God would not intervene in our favor we would certainly die). God does not need to condemn us for the second time. But when He judges us again at the pre-advent judgment, it means that His principal purpose is different: He secures legally our place in heaven in front of the heavenly court for all eternity. This judgment also unmasks the antagonistic activities of the little horn before the universe (Daniel 7-8).

Thus, we do not need to be afraid of God's pre-advent judgment, because at that judgment He affirms, confirms, reveals, discloses, and demonstrates to the heavenly world the decisions we made for Him during our lifetime. He will not add anything else to our decisions and neither will He alter them. As the faithful and true Witness of our lives, He testifies for His people that we are His (Rom 8:31; Rev 3:14). Paul states clearly: "The Lord knows those who are His" (2 Tim 2:19; compare Num 16:5). The pretho

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pain, criminality, or disease. No more cemeteries, jails, and hospitals! Love, peace, creative work and meaningful relationships will be the content of life. God's love, truth, and justice in judgment will prevail (see Phil 2:10-11; Rev 15:3-4).

The only way we can stand before the holy God is by His grace. We are saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ (Gen 15:6; Hab 2:4; Rom 1:16; 3:22-31; Eph 2:4-10; Gal 2:16; Titus 2:11-14). He is more than willing to save us; by walking with such a gracious God, it is easier to be saved than to be lost (Rom 8:35-39; Eph 1:9-10; 1 T

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The proclamation of the judgment in the context of Revelation 14 is very good news, and it is a part of the eternal Gospel. From this *indicative* of the Gospel that “His judgment hour has come” springs the *imperative* of the Gospel: “Fear God and give glory to him, . . . and worship Him who created” everything (Rev 14:7). The Gospel is a proclamation of the good news about God as our Judge!⁴⁶

Judgment is about restoring justice.⁴⁷ The Psalmist cries: “Rise up, O Judge of the earth . . . How long will the wicked, O Lord, how long will the wicked be jubilant” (Ps 94:2-3; see also Ps 74:10; Hab 1:2-3; Rev 6:10)? True uncorrupted justice can be inaugurated only by God; His love, truth, and justice will prevail! The only solution to our sinful situation and in order to not be under condemnation is t

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salvation” (Isa 25:9). Words cannot catch their excitement! The choice is ours!

Can we hide from God? David proclaims thatL

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