

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Revelation		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	15		Gary L.W. Johnson
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EXCURSUS: THE JUDGMENTS OF GOD

In Revelation 4:1, John is told that God will “show you what must take place after these things.” To what does this refer? Well, what is the major theme in the chapter that follows: Simply put – judgment. Hoeksema correctly notes, “It is well, before we enter upon a discussion of the rest of the book, which is often difficult and which requires diligent and prayerful study, to have the main theme of this portion of the Apocalypse clearly before your mind. Also in the part which is still before us there are numerous separate visions, in which you will perhaps get lost, as in a labyrinth, if you do not hold before your mind’s eye continually the main theme of the book. That main theme is the certain displacement of the kingdom of Satan by the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ, a displacement which in its process will follow the line of historical development, but which will find its final consummation in the great world-catastrophe which will accompany the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ to judge the quick and the dead. The displacement of the old and sinful order by the new and perfect one, the displacement of the satanic kingdom of darkness by the glorious kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ – such is the main theme of the rest of the book. All the visions which are recorded in the second part of the book bear upon this theme, serve to throw light upon this general subject.”¹

I am reminded of the preacher who preached on Hebrews 2:3, a text that declares, “How shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?” The preacher proceeded to give his congregation a “How To” list of how to go about actually escaping God’s judgment if they did ignore such a great salvation! Interestingly enough, all of his points were drawn from the four possibilities of escape for those who offend human laws. In the first place, it is possible that the offense shall not become known. Illustrations of this in human experience abound. Second, there is always the chance that the guilty person may be able to escape the bounds of the legal jurisdiction under which the crime was committed. Further, there may occur, after apprehension by the authorities, a breakdown in the legal processes. And, finally, the ultimate hope of the criminal is that he may escape from detention and live in a measure of freedom. The major problem with such a scheme is that there are no such possibilities with an all-knowing God (cf. Hebrews 4:13). God’s judgment is not only real and inescapable, it is absolutely just. Divine judgment by its very nature is always right. In Romans 2:1-16 the Apostle Paul will set forth the principles of divine judgment. He has already demonstrated the guilt of the Gentile world. He will now turn his attention to the Jew and those who think that their religiosity will somehow merit them special consideration. The late Leon Morris, in his classic work on the Biblical doctrine of judgment, observed, “Men today have difficulty with the idea of a day of judgment for the whole earth. The mechanics of it trouble some, and the concept of God as a Judge bothers others. Like the Greeks of antiquity they reject the whole idea, but the men of the New Testament were troubled by no such scruples. On the contrary, they held it to be fundamental and basic that God will judge all men. If God be God, He must judge all creation. Writing to the Romans Paul asks, *But if our unrighteousness commendeth the righteousness of God, what shall we say? Is God unrighteous who visiteth with wrath?* He inserts a parenthesis to explain his bold language, *I speak after*

the manner of men, and then proceeds, *God forbid: for then how shall God judge the world?* (Rom. 3:5, 6). The final judgment is not something that must be argued for. It is something that may be argued from. Paul assumes there will be no dispute about this. It is common ground for all Christians. The writer to the Hebrews takes up much the same position when he speaks of *eternal judgment* as one of *the first principles of Christ* (Heb. 6:1).”² If you have seen the movie *The Unforgiven*, there is a line by Clint Eastwood that captures the main thought of our text. In response to a remark that the man they had killed had it coming (he deserved what he got), Eastwood said, “We all got it coming.” It is because we do not realize the infinitely evil nature of all sin that we have a difficult time accepting at face value the teaching of Scripture on the wrath and judgment of a Holy God. The imprecatory Psalms (like 69, 129, and especially 109) have long been considered (even by some Christians) one of the moral difficulties of the Bible. But long ago Jonathan Edwards rightly said, “We cannot think that those imprecations we find in the Psalms and Prophets, were out of their own hearts; for cursing is spoken of as a very dreadful sin in the Old Testament; and David, whom we hear oftener than any other praying for vengeance on his enemies, by the history of his terrible imprecations that we find in all the Old Testament, are in the New spoken of as prophetic, even those in the 109th Psalm; as in Acts 1:20 . . . They wish them ill, not as personal, but as public enemies to the church of God.”³ As we come to the close of the first chapter of Romans, the Apostle Paul saw no need to vindicate the reputation of God from the charge that He is not acting properly in His judgments. He is just in all that he does. God’s righteousness is evident in three particular ways.

I. **CONFESSIOAL AFFIRMATIONS.** The late Peter Toon wrote: The Protestant Confessions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries provide more detail concerning the End than do the Ecumenical Creeds, but what they say is only an extension of the teaching of the Creeds. In the famous Lutheran Confession, the *Augsburg Confession* (1530) we read in chapter xvii:

It is also taught among us that our Lord Jesus Christ will return on the last day for judgment and will raise up all the dead, to give eternal life and everlasting joy to believers and the elect, but to condemn ungodly men and the devil to hell and eternal punishment. *Rejected*, therefore, are the Anabaptists who teach that the devil and condemned men will not suffer eternal pain and torment.

Here we have Parousia, Judgment, and Heaven/Hell. The *Anabaptists* were such men as Hans Denck and Melchoir Rinck. In a later chapter we shall examine universalism. Six Years after the Lutheran Confession came the Swiss Reformed, or Calvinistic, Confession, the *First Helvetic Confession*, which in Chapter xi, *Concerning Christ the Lord and What we have through Him*, has this:

This Lord Christ, who has overcome and conquered death, sin and the whole power of hell, is our Forerunner, our Leader and our Head. He is the true High Priest who sits at God’s right hand and always defends and promotes our cause, until He brings us back and restores us to the image in which we were created and leads us into the fellowship of his divine nature. We await this Lord Jesus to come at the end of the world as the true, righteous Judge, who will pass a true judgment upon flesh which he has raised to judgment. He will lead the godly and believing into heaven, and will condemn and thrust unbelievers into eternal damnation.

Here again we have the Parousia of the heavenly Lord, the raising of the dead, their judgment, and the final destinies of heaven and hell. In 1560 the *Scottish Confession* was published, and this too dealt with the Parousia in the same chapter as the Ascension and Session of the Lord Jesus. In chapter xi we read:

We believe that the Lord Jesus shall visibly return for this Last Judgment as he was seen to ascend. And then, we firmly believe, the time of refreshing and restitution of all things shall come, so that those who from the beginning have suffered violence, injury, and wrong, for righteousness’ sake, shall inherit that blessed immortality promised them from the beginning. But, on the other hand, the stubborn, disobedient, cruel persecutors, filthy persons, idolators and all sorts of unbelieving, shall be cast into the dungeon of utter darkness, where their worm shall not die nor their fire be quenched.”⁴

- II. **UNIVERSALLY ACKNOWLEDGED.** The heathen possess this knowledge. They are able to discern that their evil deserves to be punished by God. They possess a moral consciousness. Furthermore, they realize that God's judgments are more than mere temporal discomforts. They deserve (are worthy of) *eternal* death. Note the Apostle's point. They know, but this knowledge does not change their conduct. "But knowledge does not liberate him from practicing sin. Knowledge alone does not save him; on the contrary, it renders him guilty, for his knowledge does not prevent him from practicing that which he condemns; furthermore he completes his resistance against the truth not only by not contracting those who practice evil, but by approving them."⁵
- III. **ITS INEVITABLE DEMONSTRATION.** As certain as effect follows cause, so does punishment follow sin. There is no possible escape from condemnation for those who persist in pursuing unrighteousness (cf. Hebrews 2:3). To practice sin implies deliberation and habit. Note Paul's language here. The word translated *approve* in the NIV (the King James Version has *have pleasure in*) is *suneudokousin*. It does not describe simple passive assent or mere acquiescence, but active or hearty approval to act in a certain way (cf. Luke 11:48; Acts 8:1; 22:20; 1 Corinthians 7:23, 13). The Apostle is speaking of those whose conduct involves a deliberate rejection of the light that God has given them. Furthermore, they actually conspire to spread their wickedness.
- IV. **IT IS ESSENTIAL TO GOD'S CHARACTER.** God is not free to act contrary to His nature. Justice *always* characterizes God (cf. 1 Thessalonians 1:6; Hebrews 2:2; Jude 7). God hates sin because He is holy; it is His *nature* to hate sin. Since God hates sin then He must by His own standard of righteousness punish sin. God's righteous judgment upon sin is *certain, inevitable, and universal*.

CONCLUSION: Herman Bavinck frames the Biblical picture by noting, "The punishments that God has ordained for sin in this life are guilt, pollution, suffering, death, and the dominion of Satan. Guilt is the first and heaviest punishment. The word *guilt* [Old English *gylt*, crime] in the first place means that someone is the author or doer of something, like an *aitia* (Gr.), *causa* (Lat.). Usually it includes the idea that someone is the cause of something that ought not to be or to happen (it is his fault). In this sense guilt presupposes that we are obligated to do or to refrain from doing something. We are obligated to keep the whole law (Luke 17:10; Gal. 5:3). And if we fail to keep it, we are guilty. Inasmuch as we are the active cause of the violation, we are under indictment (*aitiasthai, accusare, reus*); the act is imputed to us. We must account for it and are obligated to satisfy the law; we are liable to punishment. Guilt is an obligation incurred through a violation of the law to satisfy the law by suffering a proportionate penalty. It binds the sinner, immediately after the violation of the law, to its demand for satisfaction and punishment. People believe that by violating the law they become free from the law, but precisely the opposite occurs: in another way they are now much more tightly bound to its demand. God, who cannot cease to be himself, even though he accords to humans the freedom to oppose him, never relinquishes his hold on them, and the latter never become free from him. At the very moment when they position themselves outside the law (i.e., outside love), it strikes them with its curse and binds them to its punishment. Guilt is an *obligation for the purpose of enduring a fair punishment, the subjection of a sinner to a penalty*.⁶ "The late Dr. John Gerstner, Professor Emeritus of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, was teaching about the depravity of man, and to make his point he compared humanity to rats. After he had finished his address there was a question-and-answer period, and someone who had been offended by the comparison asked Gerstner to apologize. *I do apologize*, he said. *I apologize profusely. The comparison was terribly unfair . . . to the rats*. He then went on to show that what a rat does, it does by the gifts of God that make it rat like. It does not sin. But we, when we behave like rats, behave worse than we should and even worse than rats. We are worse than *beasts* in our behavior."⁷

ENDNOTES

¹H. Hocksema, *Behold He Cometh* (Reformed Free Publishing, 1969), p. 151.

²L. Morris, *The Biblical Doctrine of Judgment* (Eerdmans, 1960), p. 54.

³John Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards* 1 (Ligonier, 1991), p. 524.⁴P. Toon, *Heaven and Hell: A Biblical and Theological Overview* (Nelson, 1986), p. 130ff.

⁵Adolf Schlatter, *Romans: The Righteousness of God* (Hendrickson, 1995), p. 47.

⁶H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* III (Baker, 2006), p. 170.

⁷As cited by James M. Boice, *Romans: An Expository Commentary* I (Baker, 1991), p. 179.