

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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<b>Series:</b>	<b>Revelation</b>		Pastor/Teacher
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### THE OVERTURE OF WRATH TO COME FALLS ON DEAF EARS (Part II)

The Apostles' Creed, after declaring that Christ ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father, immediately adds, "From thence He shall come to judge the living and the dead." The theme of judgment, as we shall see, is woven throughout Scripture (note specially John 5:22, 27, where we read that God who is the Judge of all has given all judgment to the Son.). "The reality of the last judgment does not preclude that at the end of our lives a decision will be made. *He that believeth not is condemned already and the wrath of God abideth on him* (see John 3:18, 36). The last judgment is the public and definitive confirmation of this. The view that a judgment is no longer to be expected cannot be based on a statement to this effect contained in the fourth gospel. This has frequently been done. Although there is a critical milestone in the present, there is also a critical milestone yet to be expected (see John 5:29; 12:48). There is no basis for the popular notion in some evangelical circles that suggest that the world's history constitutes already its judgment. It is a fact revealed by history – if we only take notice – that God's judgments fall upon this world. Indeed, what is sown will already be harvested in this life (cf. Gal. 6:7). This does not contradict that history is not the judgment but cries out for the final judgment. The book of Revelation is replete with this. Not everything is set right at the present. However, believers know from the Word of God that he will pronounce judgment and do justice. Therefore, the anticipation of the final judgment does not in the least contradict the execution of God's judgments at the time that precedes the end of the world. Note also that the final judgment is not the only judgment. But on the last day all books will be opened. All of us will have to admit that everything is as it is read from these books. Our consciences are turned inside out. They are objectified in the final judgment. We should not imagine the final judgment too humanly as a process involving accusation, questioning, and sentencing. We are dealing with a Judge who is omniscient. "To be convinced of the gravity of the final judgment, it is not necessary to know precisely how everything will happen."<sup>1</sup> "The idea of divine judgment," writes Paul Helm, "is integral to the gospel. Take it away and what Christ did is essentially change; in fact, what he did no longer makes sense."<sup>2</sup> You would think that professing evangelicals would be united in affirming this important truth. Think again. A growing number of people who proudly claim the label "Evangelical" have completely jettisoned the whole concept of divine judgment (and have redefined the gospel in the process.)<sup>3</sup> The gospel (good news) proclaims salvation by Jesus Christ. What is salvation? It is rich in meaning and significance. It means a lot of things that imply blessing and joy. One of these is *deliverance*. Salvation does imply escape from danger. It does denote release or redemption. From what? Judgment. None of us relish being judged, and since we have an aversion to the thought of judgment, we tend to give it little or no thought – or worse yet, to dismiss the concept of divine judgment as a medieval concept that we need not concern ourselves with in our more enlightened age. Think again. The Scriptures speak loud and clear on this subject (and very frequently).<sup>4</sup> Judgment is said to be supremely the work of God (Matthew 18:35; II Thessalonians 1:5; Hebrews

11:6, 12:23; James 4:12; I Peter 1:17, 2:23; Revelation 20:11, 12). This work is accomplished by Jesus Christ who has been appointed to this task (John 5:22, 27; Acts 10:42, 17:31; Romans 14:9). We are told that Christ will *summon* all before His judgment seat and judge them in strict justice according to their works (Matthew 25:32; Romans 14:9-13; II Corinthians 5:10; II Timothy 4:1, 8; I Peter 4:5; Revelation 19:11-21). These works are the expression and product of the heart and extend even to the very words (Matthew 12:36) and secret purposes of the heart (Romans 2:16; I Corinthians 4:5). Everything will be revealed (Matthew 6:4, 6, 18; Matthew 10:26; Ephesians 5:11-14; I Timothy 5:24, 25). The norm for this judgment will be the entire Word of God in both the Law and the Gospel (Romans 2:12; Matthew 25:32; Acts 17:31; Revelation 20:12).

- I. ***THE APPEARANCE OF THE JUDGE.*** The contrast between Christ's first and second coming is stated in terms of "weakness" and "power." His first appearance was, in the words of William Bate: "to be the mediator between the righteous God and sinful man, by patiently suffering the most afflictive evils; to propitiate the incensed justice of heaven against us; to restore us by humility who fell by pride; to illustrate his signal love to us, to recommend by the efficacy of his example, the meek suffering all the transient evils of the world: but the second will be to perform the last act of his regal office, to determine the eternal states of angels and men, and suitably in the glory of his Deity. The divine oracles were never less obscure than in describing the first and second coming of the Messiah; the eclipse of the Sun of Righteousness, and his future glory; and the most clear accomplishment of them in his humiliation, is a convincing visible argument they shall be fulfilled in his exaltation."<sup>5</sup>
- II. ***THE MANNER OF HIS APPEARANCE.*** His personal appearance will be *glorious*. He will be attended with *holy angels*. "Angels are frequently associated with Christ in connection with His redemptive and mediatorial work; they announce His birth, Matthew 1:20; Luke 2:8-14, resurrection, Matthew 28:2-6, and return, Acts 1:10; they ministered to Him after His temptation in the wilderness, Mark 1:13, and in Gethsemane, Luke 22:43; they will attend Him at His return to judgment, Matthew 16:27 and here, and are the agents by whom His judgments will be executed, Matthew 13:39, 41, 49; 24:31. In that day they will be called upon to worship Him, Hebrews 1:6, quoted from LXX of Deuteronomy 32:41-43, which reads: *I will render judgment to my enemies, and will recompense them that hate me . . . Rejoice, ye heavens, with Him, and let all the angels of God worship Him; cf. Psalm 97:7.*"<sup>6</sup> Hendriksen soberly notes, "Human language is stretched almost to its breaking point in order to convey the terrible character of the coming of the Lord in relation to the wicked."<sup>7</sup> He will sit upon a visible throne of glory. The glory is the glory of His Father (Matthew 16:27).
- III. ***THE PURPOSE OF HIS APPEARANCE.*** He will bring salvation (Hebrews 9:28) and execute judgment (Matthew 16:27; II Timothy 4:1). This day of God's judgment is described as majestic (II Thessalonians 1:9; Jude 14). "It is clear," says Leon Morris, "that the Judge is understood as a regal personage, as One whose appearance is awe-ful beyond description, as dispensing final justice with a royal hand. This great day is everywhere assumed throughout the New Testament. There are preliminary judgments of God throughout history. But at the end there will be the climax, that which proceeds out of the preliminary and partial judgments, and which perfectly fulfils all that they foreshadow."<sup>8</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** "The ultimate horror of God's universe," writes Wenham, "is hell. The other difficulties of the Bible and of Providence are real enough, but however appalling they may be, their seeming harshnesses and injustices are only temporary, cut short at death. The terrors of hell, on the other hand, belong to the world which lies beyond death. For a single being to endure pain hopelessly and unendingly, or even to pass out of existence and forfeit for ever the joys of heaven, is more terrible

than any temporal suffering.”<sup>9</sup> Christians are committed to the teaching of Christ; Christ taught the existence of hell with a wealth of terrifying images; it is best to let these images speak for themselves, leaving further comment to those who can discuss the issues at length. Yet this is not a mere academic exercise, it is an attempt to grapple with their heart’s cry of contemporary man who wants to know what to believe about God. If the biblical imagery is left undiscussed, there is no guarantee that he will interpret first-century images correctly. Twentieth-century man does not and cannot come to the Bible with an empty mind. The very word “hell” comes to us laden with literary and artistic associations of many centuries. The early Church did not mince words when it came to this subject. The Second Council of Constantinople (553 AD) censored the noted Church father Origen for his treatment on hell, declaring, “If anyone says or thinks that the punishment of demons and of impious men is only temporary and will one day have an end . . . let him be anathema.” Traditional orthodoxy was based on a number of seemingly plain scriptures, mostly derived from Jesus’ own teaching in the Gospels. Jesus spoke of the rich man in Hades, tormented by the flame, wishing the beggar Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water to cool his tongue, but told of the great chasm between them which no one could cross. Jesus also spoke of unquenchable fire, of the undying worm and the wailing and gnashing of teeth of Gehenna. Most strikingly of all, he used precisely the same adjective in the same sentence when speaking of “eternal (or everlasting) life” and of “eternal (or everlasting) punishment.” Having declared that on the day of judgment the Son of Man would say to those at his left hand, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels,” he concludes his solemn statement with the words: “They will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” The same teaching, but spelt out in even stronger terms, is given in the Revelation of John, where it is said of those who worship the beast that “the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever.” Later on it says: “the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.” This expression, “for ever and ever,” is repeatedly used in Revelation for the reign of God and of the saints; it seems logical therefore to infer that the torments of the lost are as unending as the bliss of the redeemed. People who want to believe in heaven but not hell have an embarrassing time with the Jesus we meet in the pages of the New Testament. “There seems to be a kind of conspiracy,” writes novelist Dorothy Sayers, “to forget, or to conceal, where the doctrine of hell comes from. The doctrine of hell is not *mediaeval priestcraft* for frightening people into giving money to the church: it is Christ’s deliberate judgment on sin. . . . We cannot repudiate Hell without altogether repudiating Christ.” In *The Problem of Pain*, C.S. Lewis writes of Hell, “There is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity than this, if it lay in my power. But it has the full support of Scripture and, specially, of our Lord’s own words; it has always been held by Christendom; and it has the support of reason.”<sup>10</sup>

The Bible declares that those outside of Christ (in unbelief) are the *enemies* of Christ (Romans 5:10, 11:28; Philippians 3:18; Colossians 1:21; Hebrews 10:1). In Psalm 2 we read of the Son’s anger and wrath, and in Revelation 6:16 we read of “the wrath of the Lamb.” Some people have a difficult time reconciling this startling image with that of the sweet and lovely Jesus they have grown so accustomed to hearing about. Jesus did come to seek and to save sinners (those deserving wrath). He came in the form of a servant and in humiliation to accomplish redemption (Philippians 2:5-11). Listen to John Calvin: “He appeared thus, then, to be made obedient in our name, as was necessary to satisfy for our sins. But now He will come to be Judge. He has been judged and condemned so that we might be delivered before the judgment seat of God, and that we might be absolved of all our sins. It will no longer be a matter of coming in such humility. He will come then with the Angels of His glory. That is what St. Paul means by saying that the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ will be dreadful.”<sup>11</sup> William Perkins long ago noted how this doctrine should not only alert us to the solemn truth of Christ’s coming in judgment, but should likewise comfort the people of God: “The godly in this world have many enemies. They are reviled, slandered, and oftentimes put to death. Well, Christ Jesus at the day of judgment will take every man’s cause into His own hand. He will then hear the

complaint of the godly, howsoever in this world they found no remedy; and then He will revenge their blood that is shed upon the earth according to their prayer (Rev. 6:10). This comfort is to be considered especially of all those that are any way persecuted or molested by the wicked of this world. . . . the last judgment must stir us up to a reverent fear of God and cause us to glorify Him – as the angel says in the Revelation, *Fear God, and give glory to him: for the hour of his judgment is come* (14:7). And doubtless, if anything in the world will move a man to fear the Lord, it is this, to remember the fearful and terrible day of judgment.”<sup>12</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> See the extended discussion by J. Van Genderen and W. H. Velema, *Concise Reformed Dogmatics* (P&R, 2008), pp. 869-871.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Helm, *The Last Things: Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1989), p. 59.

<sup>3</sup> This attitude was blatantly demonstrated by one of the leading spokesmen for “New-model” Evangelicals. Robert Brow, in his article, “Evangelical Megashift: Why You May Not Have Heard About Wrath, Sin and Hell Recently,” *Christianity Today* (Feb. 19, 1990), pp. 12-14. He concludes by saying that “no one would deny that it is easier to relate to a God perceived as kindly and loving.” In other words, since the concept of divine judgment is unpleasant, we need to adjust our view of God and make Him more likeable. Despite the fact that distinctively Christian terms are used to describe this kinder, gentler, user-friendly gospel, it is not the true Gospel. Many years ago C. H. Spurgeon warned the church about such false claims. “It is mere cant to cry, *We are evangelical; we are all evangelical*, and yet decline to say what evangelical means . . . You may believe anything, everything, or nothing and yet be enrolled in the *Evangelical* army – so they say.” Cf. John MacArthur, Jr., *Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church Becomes Like the World* (Crossway, 1993), p. 194.

<sup>4</sup> Noted New Testament scholar Joachim Jeremias wrote: “The message of Jesus is not only the proclamation of salvation, but also the announcement of judgment, a cry of warning, and a call to repentance in view of the terrible urgency of the crisis. The number of parables in this category is nothing less than awe-inspiring. *The Parables of Jesus* (Macmillan, 1972), p. 120.

<sup>5</sup> *The Complete Works of William Bates IV* (rpt. Sprinkle, 1990), p. 395.

<sup>6</sup> W. E. Vine, *Expository Commentary on 1 & 2 Thessalonians* (rpt. Nelson, 1997), p. 169.

<sup>7</sup> W. Hendriksen, *Thessalonians: New Testament Commentary* (Baker, 1955), p. 159.

<sup>8</sup> Leon Morris, *The Biblical Doctrine of Judgment* (Eerdmans, 1960), p. 60.

<sup>9</sup> J. W. Wenham, *The Goodness of God* (IVP, 1974), p. 27. I have adapted this section from pp. 27-29. Sadly, Wenham goes on to embrace a form of conditional immortality that allows for annihilationism.

<sup>10</sup> As cited by Randy Alcorn, *Heaven* (Tyndale, 2004), p. 26.

<sup>11</sup> John Calvin, *Sermons on the Saving Work of Christ* (Baker, 1950), p. 298.

<sup>12</sup> *The Works of William Perkins V* (rpt. Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), p. 304.