

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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ON DEATH AND DYING (Part 3)

We will *never* be able to understand the love of God until we grasp the significance of God's holy hatred against sin (Hebrews 1:9). We will likewise *never* grasp the Biblical understanding of God's grace until we know the full import of God's Law. Forgiveness can *never* be appreciated until we come to know the penalty of the broken law. God hates sin because sin carries in it a hatred of God. *Peccatum est deicidium* is the Latin phrase used by Thomas Goodwin to express the intense hatred sin has for God, "he that hateth God may be said to be a murderer of him, and wisheth that he were not."¹ As John Gerstner has written: "The ultimate rationale and necessity for the wrath of God is the nature of God, especially his holiness (though all his attributes are involved). An infinitely holy God simply must infinitely destroy opposition. There is no other way that the Law of God can be fulfilled. Also, God has sworn that He will be revenged, and He has given evidence that He will do it. Most of all, when the grace of the gospel itself is spurned it is necessarily turned into a wrath most terrible."² There is a *present*, as well as a future, manifestation of God's wrath, and the *present* unveiling of God's wrath is the theme of this passage of the epistle (cf. Psalm 7:11 – "God is a righteous judge, a God who expresses his wrath every day"). In Acts 20:27, the Apostle Paul declared that in the course of his ministry in Ephesus he had *not* hesitated to proclaim the whole counsel of God. No doubt that included the themes of God's wrath and judgment – and the passage before us unfolds these biblical truths in vivid detail. Speaking of this section of Romans, the noted Lutheran preacher Walter Luthi announced that Paul tells us the truth and nothing but the truth about our condition.³ Today, however, we rarely hear much about sin, wrath, and God's judgment. Evangelicals who have been taken captive by the market-driven model of church growth (seeker-sensitive and user-friendly) avoid such things like the plague. The heretical gospel of self-esteem has likewise caused many to become mute on these critical subjects. Sooner or later, however, we all come face-to-face with the brute fact of sin – not only the sin that is so obvious in the world around us, but the sin that is in us. The late Martin Lloyd-Jones once said, "I know of no passage in the Scripture which describes so accurately the world of today and the cause of the trouble."⁴

I mentioned last week that Rob Bell, in his book *Love Wins*, which promotes the doctrine of universal salvation, categorically rejects any notion of penal substitutionary atonement. Bell's defective view of God's wrath leads him to this distortion. W. G. T. Shedd long ago saw clearly what is at stake if penal substitution is denied. He wrote: "This atonement is a satisfaction for the ethical nature of God as well as man. This propitiation sustains an immediate relation to an attribute and quality in the Divine Essence, and exerts a specific influence upon it. By it God's holy justice and moral anger against sin are conciliated to guilty man, that man's remorseful conscience may, as a consequence of this pacification in the Divine Essence, experience the peace that passeth all understanding. It will therefore be the purpose of this Essay to evince that the piacular work of the incarnate Deity sustains relations to *both* the nature of God and the nature of man; and more particularly to show that the pacification of the human conscience itself is possible only in case there has been an antecedent propitiation and satisfaction of that side of the Divine Nature which is the deep and eternal ground of conscience. Before commencing the discussion, we would in the very outset guard against a misconception, which almost uniformly arises in a certain class of minds, and which is not only incompatible with any just understanding of the doctrine of atonement, but prevents even a dispassionate and candid attention to it. When it is asserted that *God requires to be propitiated*, and that *his wrath needs to be averted by a judicial infliction upon the sinner's substitute*, the

image immediately arises before such minds of an enraged and ugly demon, whose wrath is *wrong*, and who must be pacified by some *other* being than himself. Such minds labor under a twofold error, of which they ought to be disabused. Their first fatal misconception is that the Divine anger is selfish and vindictive, instead of just and vindictive of law. And their second consists in their assumption that the placation issues from some other source than the offended One himself. Assuming, as they do, that anger in God is illegitimate, the attribution of this emotion to him, of course undeifies him. And assuming, still further, that wrath against the sinner's *sin* cannot exist at the same instant with compassion toward the sinner's *soul*, they find no pity in the Deity as thus defined. His sole emotion must be that of wrath, because, as they imagine, He can have but one feeling at a time, and therefore the creature who has incurred God's displeasure must look elsewhere than to God for the source of hope and peace. Now this whole view overlooks the complex nature, the infinite plenitude, of the Godhead. For at the very instant when the immaculate holiness of God is burning with intensity, and reacting by an organic recoil against sin, the infinite pity of God is yearning with a fathomless desire to save the transgressor from *the effects of this very displeasure*. The emotion of anger against sin is constitutional to the Deity, and is irrepressible at the sight of sin. But this is entirely compatible with the existence and exercise of another and opposite feeling, at the very same moment, in reference, not indeed to the sin, but to the *soul* of the sinner. Mercy and truth meet *together*, righteousness and peace kiss each other, in the Divine Essence; and it is a mutilated and meagre conception of the Godhead that can grasp but one of these opposites at once. Even within the narrow and imperfect sphere of human life there may be, and were man holier, there often would be, the most holy and unselfish indignation at wrong doing, united with the utmost readiness to suffer and die if need be for the eternal welfare of the wrong doer."⁵

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. There are four variations of this theme in 2:1-16, which we will look at first and then consider a theological overview of God's justice.

I. GOD'S JUDGMENT IS ACCORDING TO REALITY (2:1-4). 2:1 in the Greek text begins with "Therefore" -- *dio*. It is the strongest inferential conjunction the Apostle had at his disposal. It *links* what Paul is about to declare with what he has already stated. The Jews knew the sins of the Gentiles deserved God's wrath -- but this did not alleviate their guilt. "Our own share of evil is not removed by condemning evil in others."⁶ In 2:2, the first variation of the principle of righteous judgment is introduced. God judges according to *truth*. The judgment of God concerns itself with the reality of the matter (cf. 1 Samuel 16:7). Therefore, NO escape is possible (2:3). God's goodness and patience does not mean He is indifferent to sin. To treat God so only shows contempt. Do you really think you can do this and escape God's judgment? The Apostle frames the question so that the answer is obvious. "The verb translated *think* (which comes first in the Greek) is quite Pauline. It is properly an arithmetical word and means *to count, to reckon*. But it is often used metaphorically where numbers are not in question with a meaning like *take into account, reckon, consider*. It is a word that invites to reasoning, which may be why it turns up so often in Romans. It is suited to the argumentative style that Paul adopts throughout this letter."⁷

II. GOD'S JUDGMENT IS ACCORDING TO WORKS (2:5-11). The *second* variation of Paul's theme is now developed. The Jews by refusing the Gospel are, in fact, storing up wrath for themselves on the day that God will render to each person exactly what their deeds deserve. Remember, Paul is expounding the Law -- which can only condemn. "God's judgment is not according to one's special privileges, but according to one's deeds, as the Mosaic Law itself teaches."⁸ We will examine this section in more detail next week, especially in light of the claims of what goes by the name "The Federal Vision."

III. GOD'S JUDGMENT IS ACCORDING TO IMPARTIALITY (2:12-15). The third variation is introduced. God's judgment is just. He deals with all as they deserve whether Jew or Gentile. Each is judged by the light they possess whether it is the light of the Mosaic Law, the moral law, or conscience. Note carefully that the light men possess by nature (general revelation) is not sufficient to bring salvation. God will deal with individuals according to the knowledge they have -- but mere knowledge of God's being and expectations will not satisfy divine justice. "The only virtue in hearing the law lies in hearing to do. This is exceedingly simple. A child might hear his parent's command, might admire the clearness of his voice and the perspicuity of his words, but what of his approval if he did not obey and do as told?"⁹ The point Paul is making is this: all men stand accused by the law of nature, the conscience and the memory. These three witnesses for prosecution will render everyone without excuse when they stand before God's tribunal.

IV. GOD'S JUDGMENT ACCORDING TO THE GOSPEL (2:16). Paul is seeking to drive people from their false hopes. This section of the epistle has been described as "a general statement of divine principles of judgment, made in order to destroy the refuge of lies."¹⁰ God's judgment will deal with outward conduct, but also secret or hidden things. This is a reference to the secret motions and motives of the heart (cf. 1 Samuel 16:7; Psalm 139:1-2, Jeremiah 17:10). This is clearly stated as well by Jesus (Matthew 6:4, 6, 18). This will occur on the appointed Day of Judgment. Note the role Paul gives the Gospel. Some think this awkward or strange. But the Gospel does *not* preclude the thought of judgment, as Morris has written, it demands it. "Unless judgment is a stern reality, there is nothing from which sinners need to be saved and accordingly no *good news*, no gospel."¹¹

V. GOD'S JUSTICE: A THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS. Theologians have usually ascribed *three aspects* of God's justice. When we speak of the justice of God we are first of all speaking of God's character. Our God is a moral being. "God's distinct moral attributes," wrote Dabney, "may be counted as three -- His justice, His goodness, and His truth -- these concurring in His consummate moral attribute, holiness."¹²

A. **His Rectorial Justice.** The Latin word *rectitudo* is the source for our English word *rectitude*, which refers to uprightness. "Rectorial justice," says Shedd, "is God's rectitude as a ruler, over both the good and the evil. It relates to legislation, or the imposition of law. God, both in rewarding and punishing, lays down a just law. The reward and the penalty are exactly suited to the actions. Job 34:23, *For he will not lay upon man more than right*. Psalm 89:14, *Justice and judgment are the habitation of thy throne*."¹³

B. **His Distributive Justice.** This refers to the rectitude by which God executes the law. He distributes justly both rewards and penalties. "Distributive justice is God's rectitude in the execution of law, both in reference to the good and the evil. It relates to the distribution of rewards and punishments. Romans 2:6, *God will render to every man according to his deeds*. 1 Peter 1:17, *The Father without respect of persons judgeth according to every man's work*. Isaiah 3:10, 11, *Say ye to the righteous that it shall be well with him. Woe unto the wicked! It shall be ill with him*."¹⁴ This may be explained as follows.

1. **Remunerative Justice.** The distribution of rewards to both angels and men (cf. Psalm 58:11; Matthew 25:21, 34; Hebrews 11:26). This is an expression of divine love and goodness. It is based on relative merit only.

2. **Retributive Justice.** This is the expression of divine wrath (cf. Romans 12:19 and Deuteronomy 32:35).

Herman Bavinck has succinctly summarized the distributive Justice of God. “His holy nature requires also that outside of Himself, in the world of creatures, He keep righteousness in force, and, without respect of persons reward everyone according to his works (Romans 2:2-11 and 2 Corinthians 5:10). Nowadays there are those who try to make themselves and others believe that God pays no attention to the sinful thoughts and deeds of men. But the true, the living God, whom Scriptures present to us, thinks very differently about this. His wrath is kindled terribly against native and actual sins, and He wants to punish them both temporally and eternally by way of a righteous judgment (Deuteronomy 27:26 and Galatians 3:10).”¹⁵

- C. ***His Redemptive Justice.*** This has historically been referred to by the Latin expression *iustitia evangelica*. This has to do with God’s work of justification by faith alone in Christ’s redemptive work on the cross. Our salvation rests entirely upon the sufficiency of Christ’s satisfaction and the fullest of Christ’s active and passive obedience, which is imputed to the believer.

CONCLUSION: All three aspects of God’s justice are dealt with by Paul in his epistle to the Romans. In Romans 2:1-16 he is unfolding God’s distributive justice. The Apostle Paul is reaffirming the truth of Numbers 32:23 -- “be sure of this, your sin will find you out.” There will be no escaping the day of God’s judgment. It is coming, and with each passing moment it draws closer. God *must* judge sin -- all sin. He can do no other. He is holy and righteous in all that He does. How will you fare before Him? What will you do when He calls you to account? The Gospel message declares that Jesus Christ, God’s own dear Son, died for sinners. He was judged in their stead. He atoned for their sins. Heed the words from Augustus Toplady’s famous hymn “When I soar to worlds unknown, See Thee on Thy judgment throne, Rock of Ages, cleft for me, Let me hide myself in Thee.”

ENDNOTES

¹ *The Works of Thomas Goodwin IV* (rpt. Tanski, 1996), p. 156. Sin, says the Puritan Ralph Venning, “goes about to ungod God, and is by some of the ancients *deicidium*, God-murder or God-killing, *The Plague of Plagues* (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), p. 30.

² J. Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards II* (Berea, 1992), p. 52.

³ W. Luthi, *The Letter to the Romans: An Exposition* trans. by K. Shoenenberger (Knox, 1961), p. 19.

⁴ D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *The Plight of Man and the Power of God* (Zondervan, 1977), p. 15.

⁵ W. G. T. Shedd, *Theological Essays* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1981), p. 269. Quoting Romans 5:8, 9, “If while we were yet (impenitent) sinners Christ died for us, much more than, being justified by his blood we shall be *saved from wrath* through him.” Shedd asks: “Whose wrath is this, from which, the apostle teaches, we are saved by the propitiatory death of Christ? Is it the wrath of man, and not the wrath of God? Most certainly it is not from that selfish and wicked passion in the human heart, which we most commonly associate with the term *anger*, that we are delivered by the blood of redemption. But may it not be our own moral indignation *merely*, and not that of our Creator and Judge, to which the apostle refers? May not the appeasing effect of Christ’s blood of expiation be confined to the human conscience solely, and there be no actual pacification of any attribute or feeling in the Deity? But this is only a part of the truth. We do, indeed, need to be saved from the terrible wrath and remorse of our own consciences, as they bite back (*remordere*) upon us after the commission of sin, -- and of this we shall speak in its place, -- but we need primarily to be saved from the judicial displeasure of that immaculate Spirit, in whose character and ethical feeling towards sin the human conscience itself has its eternal ground and authority, and of which it is the most sensitive index and measure. The natural teaching, then, of these and similar passages of scripture is, that the atoning sacrifice of the God-man renders, *propitius* towards the transgressor, that particular side of the Divine Nature, and that one specific emotion of the living God, which otherwise and without it is displacent and unappeased. This atonement is a satisfaction for the ethical nature of God as well as man. This propitiation sustains an immediate relation to an attribute and quality in the Divine Essence and exerts a specific influence upon it. But if God’s holy justice and moral anger against sin are conciliated to guilty man, that man’s remorseful conscience may, as a consequence of this pacification in the Divine Essence, experience the peace that passeth all understanding. It will therefore be the purpose of this Essay to evince that the piacular work of the incarnate Deity sustains relations to *both* the nature of God and the nature of man; and more particularly to show that the pacification of the human conscience itself is possible only in case there has been an antecedent propitiation and satisfaction of that side of the Divine Nature which is the deep and eternal ground of conscience.” p. 268.

⁶ James Stifler, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Revell, 1949), p. 31.

⁷ W. H. Griffith-Thomas, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1962), p. 81.

⁸ L. Morris, op. cit., p. 129.

⁹ R. L. Dabney, *Lectures In Systematic Theology* (rpt. Zondervan, 1975), p. 165.

¹⁰ W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* I (rpt. Zondervan, 1971), p. 365.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Dabney, op. cit.

¹³ Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, p. 166.

¹⁴ Cf. H. Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith* (rpt. Baker, 1977), p. 141.

¹⁵ Ibid.