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Love and judgment: *God's triumph—Part 1*

Christians treasure God's attributes of love, grace, and mercy, but many are uncomfortable with His justice because divine judgment deals with human sinfulness and guilt. Among many things the Bible makes plain, one of the foremost is God's attitude of justice and judgment in the face of unrighteousness and sinfulness. Listen to the thundering voice of Amos: "Let justice run down like water. And righteousness like a mighty stream" (Amos 5:24).¹ Or listen to Hosea's portrayal of God's contempt of deceit:

They are deeply corrupted [9:9],
They have spoken words,
Swearing falsely in making a covenant [10:4].
"My people are bent on backsliding from Me.
Though they call to the Most High, none at all exalt Him" [11:7].
"Ephraim has encompassed Me with lies,
And the house of Israel with deceit" [11:12].

Or go to Jeremiah:

"Your iniquities have turned these and your sins have kept good from you.
For wicked men are found among my people;
they lurk like fowls lying in wait.
They set a trap;
they catch men.

Like a basket full of birds,
their houses are full of treachery;
therefore they have become great and rich,
they have grown fat and sleek.
They know no bounds in deeds of wickedness;
they judge not with justice
the cause of the fatherless, to make it prosper,
and they do not defend the rights of the needy" (5:25–28, RSV).

Such tough and demanding texts reveal that guilt is not merely a psychological problem—it involves the reality of sinfulness.

A truth often ignored is that God is not indifferent to sin and we as sinners are all under judgment. To God sin is a grievous issue, a rebellion against Him, and hence He cries out: "How can I pardon you?" (v. 7, RSV); "Shall I not punish them?" (v. 29)—denoting that sin brings upon punishment.

God, per se, has no pleasure in the punishment of the wicked, nor does He enjoy the suffering of the sinful, but sin is so hateful to God that it penetrates His heart with grief and sorrow. He is deeply troubled over how we have transgressed His path and chosen to live a life of sin. Between His love of holiness and His hatred of evil, God experiences utter anguish at having loved us and then having been betrayed by us. Hence, judgment gushes out of His holiness and righteousness. He grieves like a human parent because

of our sinfulness, and guilt causes Him deep hurt and pain. Christians treasure the privilege of calling God "Father." Why should there be any dismay when He demonstrates the strong affections of a father and His protective concern over His human family? What kind of Father would He be if He did not deal with the terrible evil harming His children, His "property"?

Look again how Jeremiah portrays God's feelings on Ephraim's betrayal and His yearning for his return:

"Is E'phraim my dear son?"
["I taught Ephraim to walk,
Taking them by their arms,
But they did not know that I healed them" (Hos. 11:3).]
"Is he my darling child?
For as often as I speak against him I do remember him still.
Therefore my heart yearns for him.
I will surely have mercy on him,"
says the LORD (Jer. 31:20, RSV).

What we learn from passages such as this is that God's wrath against sin is real, even as His love for His people never fails. The thought is not restricted to one or two prophets; it is pervasive throughout Scripture. Nowhere is God's wrath ever denied. Indeed, the extensive presence in the Bible of God's hatred and judgment toward sin must be stressed because of the modern tendency to deny it or explain it away. To deny or ignore God's hatred and judgment of sin will lead to a failure to

understand the holy nature of God and our own sinful predicament.

God's wrath and the seriousness of sin

Having said that, it is important to note that the wrath of God underscores the seriousness of sin. In Scripture, sin is not a minor deficiency that a loving God will sweep under the rug. God loves righteousness (Ps. 11:5–7; 33:5; 48:10), and hatred marks His attitude to unrighteousness (Zech. 8:17).

Not surprisingly, the Bible also calls upon those who love God to exercise a similar attitude: “You who love the LORD, hate evil!” (Ps. 97:10). Perhaps, because sin does not cause an inner revulsion or anger in us, we find it hard to imagine God’s wrath against sin. While many Christians have difficulty with this aspect of biblical teaching, biblical writers fully understood the twin aspect of God’s love for sinners and God’s wrath against sin.

God's judgment against sin

How do we understand divine wrath against sin? If we think of this as an uncontrollable outburst of fury, that attitude is a pagan notion and completely foreign to Scripture. When the Bible speaks of God’s wrath, it speaks of it as the absolute hostility of the Holy God to every form of evil. It is not an unpredictable flare-up of personal animosity but God’s holy and unquenchable antagonism for evil. Biblical writers often present God as Judge with a moral fortitude that cannot tolerate sin, but they insist on divine judgment on sin. Daniel saw in vision two aspects of the heavenly tribunal at work: life to those who live according to God’s will and everlasting death to those who are subject to God’s wrath because of their sin (Dan. 12:1–4). So John the revelator saw God’s love and wrath at work in His attitude toward sin (Rev. 20:11–15).

The Bible is replete with such narratives of God as Judge. Abraham saw and addressed God as the Judge: “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?”

(Gen. 18:25). In that acknowledgment we see God not only as One who rightly punishes evil but also as One who would not needlessly destroy even though some people so deserve.

When Abraham converses with God about judgment, he was already called into a covenant relationship with Him: “And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3). Even as God is about to pronounce judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah, He affirms His blessing on Abraham: “Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him[.] For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the LORD, to do righteousness and justice” (Gen. 18:18, 19).

Such a promise of blessing at a time of divine judgment is extraordinary. Sodom’s sinful reputation has already been established: “the men of Sodom were exceedingly wicked and sinful against the LORD” (Gen. 13:13). Their sin ascends to confront God: “And the LORD said, ‘Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grave, I will go down now and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry against it that has come to Me’” (Gen. 18:20, 21). Genesis 19 describes the debased “men of the city, the men of Sodom, both old and young, all the people from every quarter” (v. 4) determined to abuse Lot’s guests. God strikingly restates His covenant promise to Abraham even as He prepares to rain down judgment against this particularly depraved city—insisting His ultimate purpose is blessing (v. 18). Judgment is necessary, but God’s goal is blessing.

Regrettably, in the end, not even ten righteous people could be found in Sodom. “Pity the city that lacks even ten innocent people, as Sodom does: All its men gather at Lot’s door . . . to the last person (Gen. 19:4).”² Yet Abraham’s query whether God would “‘destroy the righteous with the wicked’” (Gen. 18:23) He answered. The

divine Judge is very merciful. Though Lot and his daughters hardly qualify as righteous, angels drag them away from the impending cataclysm.

The point is noteworthy. Because of God’s mercy to Lot, the Israelites could later understand how God was directing their conquest of Canaan. That direction was not just to eliminate nations because they were perverse but contained within it the possibility of saving even a tiny minority if that was the case in the city, as He did in Sodom, and earlier during the Flood (Gen. 6; also during the conquest of Jericho, Josh. 2).

Sodom: A biblical type of human society

Thus Sodom becomes a biblical type of human society at its worst, which instructs us of how ripe for judgment they were. Later Moses compares Israel’s future idolatry to Sodom and Gomorrah: “The coming generation of your children who rise up after you, and the foreigner who comes from a far land, would say, when they see the plagues of that land and the sicknesses which the LORD has laid on it; ‘The whole land is brimstone, salt, and burning; it is not sown, nor does it bear, nor does any grass grow there, like the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah, . . . which the LORD overthrew in His anger and His wrath.’ All nations would say, ‘Why has the LORD done so to this land? What does the heat of this great anger mean?’ Then people would say: ‘Because they have forsaken the covenant of the LORD God of their fathers, . . . for they went and served other gods and worshiped them’” (Deut. 29:22–26).

God’s promise of land to Israel in fulfillment of His promise to Abraham needs to be understood in this light. Israel’s deliverance from Egypt is a climactic divine action against injustice and violence. This does not mean, however, that the Israelites were in some exalted position of sinlessness. On the other hand, God’s deliverance of Israel demonstrates God’s great mercy and grace toward them.

Isaiah also compares Jerusalem to Sodom and Gomorrah, condemning it for its bloodshed, corruption, and injustice (Isa. 1:9–23). He also likens the future divine judgment of Babylon to that of the two infamous cities: “‘Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldeans’ pride, will be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah’” (Isa. 13:19).

Likewise Ezekiel compares the enormity of Judah’s iniquities to Sodom’s sins of arrogance, affluence, and ignoring the poor:

“‘Your elder sister is Samaria, who dwells with her daughters to the north of you; and your younger sister, who dwells to the south of you, is Sodom and her daughters. You did not walk

The deliverance of Israel from Egypt is, in fact, no different from what God has done with other nations, for all are under God’s sovereignty. In fact, Israel is not the only nation that has an exodus: “‘Are you not like the people of Ethiopia to Me, O children of Israel?’ says the LORD. ‘Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt, the Philistines from Caphtor, And the Syrians from Kir?’” (Amos 9:7).

Divine judgment against the Canaanite nations is repeatedly portrayed in moral terms: God acts in divine justice against the excessive and vile wickedness of these nations. And He will do precisely the same to His people if they follow after the appalling practices of the Canaanites.

The children of Israel, redeemed from oppression and slavery, unfortunately allow ungodly tendencies that follow. The wrath of God’s judgment therefore punishes their grievous rebellion just as severely as it had the Egyptians. Their miraculous Exodus deliverance ends in exile, proving, as the prophets regularly insist, that Israel’s moral condition is no different from what plagues all humanity—hardness of heart, deafness to God’s Word, unwillingness to walk in His ways, and sinful rebellion (Deut. 10:12). Their fundamental need was a new heart (Isa. 43:25; Jer. 31:34; Ezek. 36:24–32).

The book of Judges illustrates the same principle. As Israel settles into the

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in their ways nor act according to their abominations; but as if that were too little, you became more corrupt than they in all your ways.

“‘As I live,’ says the Lord God, ‘neither your sister Sodom nor her daughters have done as you . . . have done’” (Ezek. 16:46–48).

Amos speaks similarly. Israel cannot claim that only they matter to God. Tragically, they become a sinful nation. They assert they are God’s special people, but their relationship with Him deteriorates so desperately that God has to administer justice: “‘You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities’” (Amos 3:2).

God’s judgment, God’s glory

Moses’ farewell sermon, the book of Deuteronomy, pointedly begins and concludes with Israel’s sinfulness. The opening chapter recalls the tragic failure of the Exodus generation. It ends with the future failure of later generations that will eventually lead to an outpouring of God’s judgment with other nations watching with astonishment: “‘Why has the LORD done this to this land? Why this fierce burning anger?’” (Deut. 9:24, NIV). The reply comes, “‘Because they have forsaken the covenant of the LORD God of their fathers, which He made with them when He brought them out of the land of Egypt’” (Deut. 29:25).

land of Canaan, over and over they turn away from the living God. Again and again God brings other nations as tools of judgment against Israel’s apostasy and rebellion (Isa. 7:18; 9:11; Amos 6:14; Hosea 10:10).

In the last years of the monarchy, the great empires of the world are described by the prophets as instruments in the hand of God to punish Israel: “‘Woe to Assyria, the rod of My anger, and the staff in whose hand is My indignation. I will send him against an ungodly nation, and against the people of My wrath [Israel]’” (Isa. 10:5, 6).

God can elect any nation as His agent of judgment. Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon carried out divine judgment on Egypt (Ezek. 30:10, 11). Later, Babylon

itself will fall under divine judgment of the Medes and Persians for its violent excesses (Isa. 13:17–19; 47:6, 7).

Jeremiah’s language is especially striking: God calls King Nebuchadnezzar “My servant” as the Babylonian army takes Israel into exile (Jer. 25:9; 27:5, 6; 43:10) because of Israel’s persistent wickedness. Both God and Nebuchadnezzar “will not pity or spare or have compassion” (Jer. 13:14, RSV) as Jerusalem is destroyed. Both God and Babylon break, destroy, scatter, drive away, fight, strike down, pursue, and send Israel into exile. Biblical history faithfully recounts how different nations set themselves defiantly against God and become so incorrigibly wicked that they finally have to be destroyed.

The prophet Habakkuk, concerned about Judah’s wickedness, injustice, and sinfulness, wrestles with this issue as he prophesies during the last years of Judah (1:2–4). The divine Judge responds that He is raising up the Babylonians (vv. 5–11). Habakkuk expresses his concern that the Babylonians are idolaters and violent oppressors, even more wicked than Judah, and should themselves be judged (vv. 12–17). He acknowledges that Israel is sinful but cannot understand why God uses an even more wicked people to administer judgment.

God responds that, yes, Babylon has evil motives and is arrogant and violent, but she will be punished for her sins: as she has done to others, so it will be done to her (2:6–20). But for now, the sovereign God can use nations such as Babylon to accomplish His will against Judah. Yet, because of this, Babylon will not escape divine justice, and remarkably God’s glory will ultimately be manifest!

Habakkuk does not stop there. He recalls how God revealed His glory and power in Egypt on behalf of Israel and urges God to “remember mercy” “in wrath” (3:2), and then expresses his faith:

Though the fig tree may not blossom,
Nor fruit be on the vines;
Though the labor of the olive may fail,
And the fields yield no food;
Though the flock be cut off from the fold,
And there be no herd in the stalls—
Yet I will rejoice in the LORD,
I will joy in the God of my salvation
(vv. 17, 18).

The prophet Nahum acknowledges that even nature trembles before the sovereign Creator, who will administer righteous retribution (1:2–6) against the city of Nineveh as one “who plots evil” (vv. 7–11), even though it earlier repented.

The prophet Ezekiel also struggles with God’s judicial dealings. He is of the very generation that experiences God’s judgment as he is taken captive. Israel’s sins are so awful and extensive that God has no alternative but to fulfill the covenant threats of which He has warned: “‘Son of man, when the people of Israel were living in their own land, they defiled it by their conduct and their actions. Their conduct was like a woman’s monthly uncleanness in my sight. So I poured out my wrath on them because they had shed blood in the land and because they had defiled it with their idols. I dispersed them among the nations, and they were scattered through the countries; I judged them according to their conduct and their actions’” (Ezek. 36:17–19, NIV).

From the human perspective, Israel’s captivity is political and humanly orchestrated, but in the divine perspective revealed through the prophets, God is at work, carrying out His sovereign global purposes.

The sovereign God rules the world with one standard of righteousness. Everyone lives equally under God’s moral scrutiny. Again and again the prophets insist that everyone is accountable to the sovereign divine Judge. The God who calls Abraham to

be a blessing to all nations is the God who governs all nations. He calls Israel to be His treasured possession, but He also insists, “The whole earth is mine.”

During some acts of judgment God takes a more active role, at other times a more passive one, delivering people into the hands of their enemies (Isa. 65:6, 7; Ps. 81:11, 12); or He gives people up (Ps. 81:11–16; Isa. 34:2; 43:28; 47:6; 64:7; Jer. 29:21; also Rom. 1:24–28), again reminding us that there is an intrinsic relationship between sinful deeds and their consequences. In His acts of judgment, God also works through human agents within and outside the covenant line. He also employs the elements, such as the wind, water, and darkness, for He is sovereign over all creation.³ In the case of Sodom and Gomorrah, God issues judgment with fire (as He promises to do again, according to Revelation). Yet His ultimate intention is always to bless so everyone “will know that I am Yahweh.” There are no spectators: all people are involved. The covenant between Yahweh and Abraham had a universal dimension from the beginning.

Divine wrath is connected more often with God’s covenant name Yahweh than with any of His other names. There are times when the wrath of God is directed against the other nations. And the importance of these passages should not be minimized, for God’s wrath is directed against all evil. But more often God’s wrath is directed against His chosen people.

(Part 2 will appear in the May 2014 issue of *Ministry*.) ❧

1 All verses, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the New King James Version.
2 John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology: Israel’s Gospel*, vol. 1 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2003), 228.
3 E.g., the crossing of the Red Sea (Exod. 14: 15). Divine use of the forces of nature is thus seen throughout the Old Testament, including sickness and famine (Num. 11:33; Deut. 28:20–24, 58–61; 2 Sam. 24:15–17; Pss. 88:16; 90:5–8). Even animals and birds can be employed (see Jer. 7:33; 12:9; 16:4; 19:7; 27:6; 28:14—paralleled with “the sword” in 15:3). Desolation of the land, an effect of human iniquity, can be used by God as an instrument of judgment (Jer. 3:2, 3; 5:24, 25; 14:2–12). God’s good creation is at stake because of sinful human behavior.

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