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Love and judgment: God's triumph—Part 2

Everyone faces judgment. Throughout the Scriptures the divine voice insists with unrelenting conviction that all people stand under God's judgment because of sin. Isaiah states this in searing words: "The earth is also defiled under its inhabitants, because they have transgressed the laws, changed the ordinance, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore the curse has devoured the earth, and those who dwell in it are desolate. Therefore the inhabitants of the earth are burned, and few men are left" (Isa. 24: 5, 6).¹

The judgment message has two complementary aspects: God's justice against sin on the one hand, and on the other, the extension of God's blessing to all nations along with the vindication of His love, justice, and mercy. The Scriptures clearly emphasize God's loathing of evil, linked with the certainty of divine punishment and mercy: "Therefore the LORD will wait, that He may be gracious to you; and therefore He will be exalted, that He may have mercy on you, for the LORD is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for Him" (Isa. 30:18). The Bible also reminds us that sin produces deadly guilt, and it is this guilt that often causes our blindness to God's goodness.

A failure to understand this truth often leads to a misinterpretation of Scripture. For example, we look at Leviticus as being preoccupied with

guilt, but in essence the book is a portrayal of the seriousness of sin and how God provides forgiveness and makes reconciliation possible. Leviticus is all about grace. Likewise, while Psalms speaks plainly of the human predicament of sin, again the preoccupation is not with guilt but with God who redeems sinners from their guilt.

Christopher Wright notes this: "The Creator God has a purpose, a goal, and it is nothing less than blessing the nations of humanity. So fundamental is this divine agenda that Paul defines the Genesis text as declaring 'the gospel in advance' (Gal. 3:8). And the concluding vision of the whole Bible signifies the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise, as people from every nation, tribe, language and people are gathered among the redeemed in the new creation (Rev. 7:9)."²

The standard by which all nations are judged is the mercy of God: "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion" (Exod. 33:19). If any person or any nation repents, they will be spared. If any person, any nation, chooses evil in spite of God's desire to bless, they will suffer divine judgment (Jer. 18:7-10).

We like to address and relate to God as "Father" but then express dismay when He exhibits the protective strength of a Father over His children, seeking to halt sin's harmful results.

Some Christians suppose God is like a "grandfather in the sky" with no concern for sinfulness, granting us happiness without any regard to our moral conduct. God is allowed to be loving but not allowed to judge. However, the God of Scripture declares He will bring judgment against sin and retribution on sins that damage the earth and destroy human beings created in His image. All biblical writers, and Jesus Himself, insist this.

God's judgment and mercy

God's dealing with Nineveh clearly illustrates this. God sent the prophet Jonah to pronounce divine judgment on Nineveh. The entire city repents, from the king on his throne to the least person. As a result, God "relents" and withholds His judgment from the violent city. However, this signal demonstration of God's mercy toward Nineveh is extremely frustrating to Jonah. He obviously knows God's merciful character: "'Ah, LORD, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm'" (Jon. 4:1, 2).

God commissioned Jonah to proclaim His approaching judgment on Nineveh because of its sinfulness. But when the people repented, God's

amazing grace offered mercy and forgiveness. God pronounced judgment on the wicked yet extended redemptive grace to them, for they repented and turned away from evil.

Jonah failed to appreciate this, and hence God explains: “ ‘And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left—and much livestock?’ ” (v. 11). This final statement from God to His petulant prophet should caution us against any tendency to foist our own

- Exodus 32–34. Israel’s golden calf apostasy causes a judgment crisis, but the intercession of Moses and the repentance of Israel bring God’s redemptive grace. The psalmist understood: “The LORD executes righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed. He made known His ways to Moses, His acts to the children of Israel. The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in mercy. He will not always strive with us, nor will He keep His anger forever. He has not dealt with us according to

threatening clouds of God’s justice, the prophet also speaks of God’s mercy to Egypt and Assyria and His redemptive blessing with these powerful words:

“In that day there will be an altar to the LORD in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the LORD at its border. And it will be for a sign and for a witness to the LORD of hosts in the land of Egypt; for they will cry to the LORD because of the oppressors, and He will send them a Savior and a Mighty One, and He will deliver them. Then the

God is passionately concerned about the sinfulness, abuse, corruption, brutality, and bloodshed that harm His children and destroy the earth He created and treasures.

attitudes on the Almighty Judge.

Compare Jonah’s attitude toward Nineveh with Abraham’s toward Sodom and Gomorrah. Jonah is called to warn Nineveh of their deserving doom but runs away from his commission and later tells God that he ran because he knew God would show compassion. By contrast, when God tells Abraham that He will destroy Sodom and Gomorrah because of its sin, Abraham accepts God’s sovereign justice, knowing that “the Judge of all the earth” (Gen. 18:25) would do right. But Abraham knows that the Divine Judge is also gracious to the repentant sinner and so intercedes with God on behalf of Sodom (Gen. 18).

Bible writers are consistent: as Judge, God will deal with sin, while at the same time, offering a way of forgiveness and salvation. This can be traced throughout Scripture. Some examples:

our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities” (Ps. 103:6–10). Many psalms celebrate God as Judge with “compassion on all he has made” (Ps. 145:8, 9, NIV).

- The prophet understood: God is gracious and compassionate. He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked but longs that they turn from their ways and live (Ezek. 18:23). His forgiveness and mercy are extended to anyone in any nation.
- Isaiah 19 provides another dramatic portrait of divine judgment and salvation. Verses 1–16 picture the judgment of God against Egypt: its heart will melt (v. 1); experiencing internal divisions will lead to a failure of its spirit (vv. 2–4); it will undergo a horrible drought, economic disaster, and administrative chaos (vv. 5–10). Against such

LORD will be known to Egypt, and the Egyptians will know the LORD in that day, and will make sacrifice and offering; yes, they will make a vow to the LORD and perform it. And the LORD will strike Egypt, He will strike and heal it; they will return to the LORD, and He will be entreated by them and heal them.

“In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will serve with the Assyrians.

“In that day Israel will be one of three with Egypt and Assyria—a blessing in the midst of the land, whom the LORD of hosts shall bless, says, ‘Blessed is Egypt My people, and Assyria the work of My hands, and Israel My inheritance’ ” (Isa. 19:19–25).

God's ultimate concerns

God is passionately concerned about the sinfulness, abuse, corruption, brutality, and bloodshed that harm His children and destroy the earth He created and treasures. So much so that what He declares about these issues takes up more space in the Bible than anything else. One thing we must not fail to understand: with God the causes of judgment never change, nor can He be accused of favoritism in His administration of justice. We all stand under judgment because of sin, and we can all turn to God and find mercy.

God can be trusted to be a just and righteous Judge. For one thing, the more any judge knows about a case, the more likely the case will be judged correctly. The heavenly court is headed by a Judge who knows the “end from the beginning.” Nothing is hidden from His eyes. He can even perceive all motives and therefore judge each case absolutely fairly: “He shall not judge by the sight of His eyes, nor decide by the hearing of His ears; but with righteousness He shall judge the poor. . . . Righteousness shall be the belt of His loins, and faithfulness the belt of His waist” (Isa. 11:3–5).

Another essential quality for an upright judge is integrity (Exod. 23:6–8). The heavenly Judge is a “God of truth” (Ps. 31:5); “His work is perfect; for all His ways are justice, a God of truth and without injustice; righteous and upright is He” (Deut. 32:4). Wickedness will not go unnoticed, but it will be dealt with justly: “You caused judgment to be heard from heaven; the earth feared and was still, when God arose to judgment, to deliver all the oppressed of the earth” (Ps. 76:8, 9).

God never acts capriciously in petty anger. His judging acts are clearly related to sin and its effects—always for the purpose of delivering His people. This is underscored in Scripture (e.g., Jer. 5:12–17; 6:13–15). In fact, this is one reason biblical writers regularly rejoice that divine judgment is promised! “Let the sea roar and all it contains,

the world and those who dwell in it. Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy before the LORD, for He is coming to judge the earth; He will judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with equity” (Ps. 98:7–9, NASB).

According to this psalm and others, what calls for particular praise is the fact that God is coming to judge in righteousness and truth (Ps. 96:10, 13). Divine judgment is anticipated with joy because everything that is now suffering from injustice and violence will be set right. Judgment is good news!

Sin has terrible consequences, resulting either in divine condemnation or in forgiveness. God sometimes allows disaster that is “the fruit of their schemes” (Jer. 6:19, NIV; see also Hos. 8:7; 10:13), also insisting: “I will pour out their wickedness upon them” (Jer. 14:16, NRSV). God judges all “according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings” (Jer. 17:10, NRSV; see also 32:19); “according to their own judgments I will judge them” (Ezek. 7:27, NRSV). He always is concerned about fairness and accountability, promising that the judgment will fit the crime. He mediates consequences intrinsic to the wickedness itself, yet His salvific intent is always consistent with His gracious determination to bless. For example, Jeremiah presents to both Judah and the surrounding nations the identical gift of divine forgiveness and restoration, if only they will repent (Jer. 12:14–17).

Sin contaminates and wreaks havoc with all creation. The wicked prosper (v. 1), and the innocent suffer the consequences of the effects of the sins of others. Human sinfulness affects all life, including animals and even the land. The natural world is innocently caught up in the results of sin, a testimony to the interconnectedness of life, something scientists are just beginning to understand. Therefore, not surprisingly, final restoration will include the natural world. Both Testaments insist that God’s purpose is nothing less than a new heaven and new earth where

justice will prevail universally. Nature will be restored, ending the violence the earth has had to suffer. No wonder the prophets and the psalmist plead for judgment.

The entire Bible consistently reveals the merciful character of the divine Judge without ever reducing or ignoring the terrible realities of sin. The New Testament never denies or nullifies what the Old Testament reveals about God’s comprehensive commitment to justice and His relentless hatred of all that oppresses or diminishes life. Likewise, His promise of blessing all people has never changed. Biblical writers deal honestly with the gravity of sin because they know the divine remedy.

In fact, in terms of straightforward legal thinking, God as Judge is much too lenient. He is patient, forbearing, and “slow to anger,” even relenting from bringing judgment on the wicked who repent. However, in mercy, God ultimately will completely destroy sin and its dreadful consequences.³ He has a comprehensive redemptive agenda that is open to everyone and all creation—and He yearns to finish His great salvation. Yes, “the Judge of all the earth” will do right: “The LORD is our Judge, the LORD is our Lawgiver, the LORD is our King; He will save us” (Isa. 33:22).

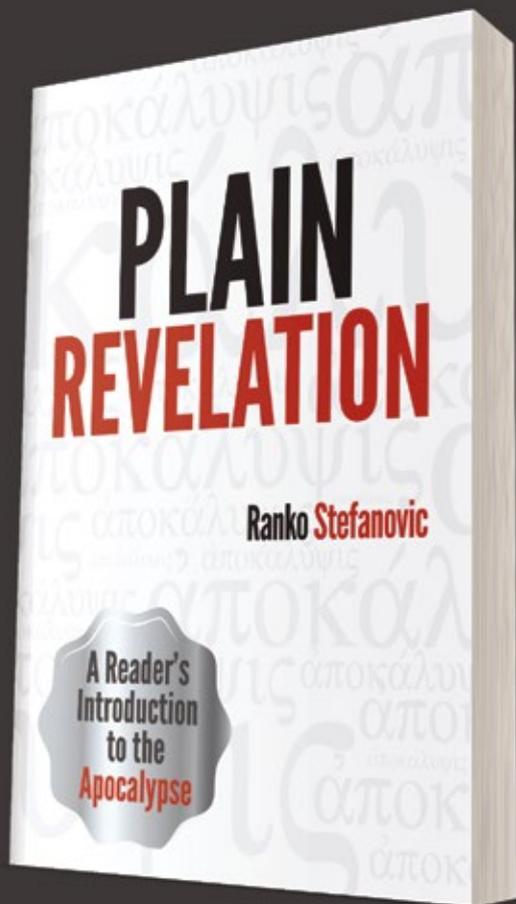
Dare to look into the face of the heavenly Judge and see your Savior! **V**

1 Unless otherwise stated, all scriptural references are from the New King James Version.
 2 Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 328.
 3 Ellen White describes this principle when writing about ancient Jerusalem: “Christ came to save Jerusalem with her children; but Pharisaical pride, hypocrisy, jealousy, and malice had prevented Him from accomplishing His purpose. Jesus knew the terrible retribution which would be visited upon the doomed city. . . . “Jerusalem had been the child of His care, and as a tender father mourns over a wayward son, so Jesus wept over the beloved city. How can I give thee up? How can I see thee devoted to destruction? Must I let thee go to fill up the cup of thine iniquity? One soul is of such value that, in comparison with it, worlds sink into insignificance; but here was a whole nation to be lost. . . . While the last rays of the setting sun were lingering on temple, tower, and pinnacle, would not some good angel lead her to the Saviour’s love, and avert her doom? . . . [H]er day of mercy was almost spent!
 “. . . If Jerusalem will hear the call, if she will receive the Saviour who is entering her gates, she may yet be saved.” *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1940), 577, 578.

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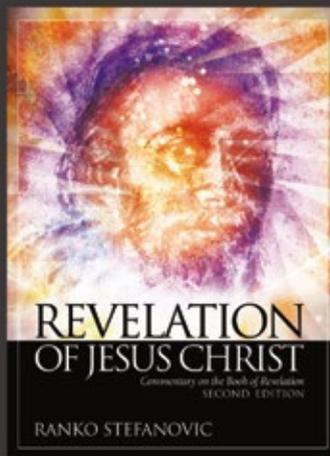
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