

Andrews University

Digital Commons @ Andrews University

Faculty Publications

1-7-1988

Assurance in the Judgment: How I Lost My Fear of Heaven't Courtroom

Richard Davidson

Andrews University, davidson@andrews.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pubs>

Recommended Citation

Davidson, Richard, "Assurance in the Judgment: How I Lost My Fear of Heaven't Courtroom" (1988).
Faculty Publications. 1788.

<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pubs/1788>

This Popular Press is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Andrews University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Andrews University. For more information, please contact repository@andrews.edu.

Assurance in the Judgment

How I lost my fear of heaven's courtroom.

BY RICHARD M. DAVIDSON

I have not always considered the judgment as part of the assuring good news of the gospel. While growing up in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, I used to shudder at the mention of the investigative judgment. The thought of my name coming up in the heavenly judgment, with all my sins brought before God and the onlooking universe, caused me to feel, *I'll never make it! Please don't let my name come up today.*

Imagine my surprise when, as a young pastor, I came across a number of prayers in the book of Psalms in which the psalmist actually welcomed, yes, even longed for, the judgment. The more general plea for judgment seemed shocking enough: "Arise, O God, judge the earth" (Ps. 82:8). Expressions of joy and exuberance at the coming judgment were beyond my comprehension: "Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice. . . . Then shall all the trees of the wood sing for joy before the Lord, for he comes, for he comes to judge the earth" (Ps. 96:11-13, RSV). Did he not under-

stand the sinfulness of sin, the seriousness of the judgment?

He understood. Note his prayer of repentance after the affair with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband: "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in thy sight, so that thou art justified in thy sentence and blameless in thy judgment" (Ps. 51:3,4, RSV).

David comprehended the heinousness of his sin and the reality of the judgment. But he also understood the message of righteousness by faith! David saw that, sinful though he was, his sins could be covered and cleansed by the blood of the Substitute. In joy he could cry out, "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered" (Ps. 32:1).

Scripture consistently upholds the filthiness of sin and the certainty of the judgment. But it also reveals that the Lamb of God, our substitute, has been accepted in our place. As we receive Christ, we are covered with the robe of His righteousness. God says to the great accuser, "The Lord rebuke thee, O Satan!" (Zech. 3:2). We are acquitted, pardoned, cleansed.

Turning the Tables

In the judgment the tables are turned. No longer do we stand accused as a defendant, for Christ has paid the full price for our acquittal. Now we become the plaintiff, calling for vindication against the false charges of Satan. Now with David we can long for and welcome the judgment. We can pray, "Judge [vindicate, RSV] me, O Lord my God, according to thy righteousness" (Ps. 35:24).

Vindication in the judgment! Assurance in the judgment! That's good news—almost too good to be true! And I dared not believe it even as a theology major in college, as a seminary student, and as a young pastor. Statements such as the following kept ringing in my ears: "Those who accept the Saviour, however sincere their conversion, should never be taught to say or to feel that they are saved" (*Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 155; cf. *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 314). I didn't understand that Ellen White was refuting the erroneous belief of "once saved, always saved." I thought she meant that one could never have present assurance of salvation. How tragic that I did not see in the very same paragraph God's assurance that we can "give ourselves to Christ and know that He accepts us"!

For more than two years I preached sermons full of Christ yet devoid of assurance. But finally, through a chain of marvelous providential leadings, the simplicity and beauty of the gospel began to dawn before my eyes.

The sublime promises jumped out at me from Scripture: "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes *has* eternal life" (John 6:47, RSV). "I write this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may *know* that you *have* eternal life" (1 John 5:13, RSV; cf. verses 11, 12). I found the same glorious revelation in the words of Ellen White: "If you give yourself to Him, and accept Him as your Saviour, then, sinful as your life may have been, for His sake you are accounted righteous. Christ's character stands in place of your char-

"For more than two years I preached sermons full of Christ, yet devoid of assurance. But finally, through a chain of marvelous providential leadings, the simplicity and beauty of the gospel began to dawn before my eyes" (Richard M. Davidson).



The 1888 delegates elected O. A. Olsen as the new General Conference president, although he was in Scandinavia and unable to take up his new duties for about six months.

acter, and you are *accepted before God* just as if you had not sinned" (*Steps to Christ*, p. 62).

Joy and Peace

The marvelous news that I was "accepted in the beloved" (Eph. 1:6), that Christ is my righteousness, brought to my soul a joy and peace like that described by the ones who heard the gospel message in the wake of the 1888 General Conference session. Ellen White captured my own feelings as she depicted the experience of many at the Ottawa, Kansas, camp meeting in 1889: "Light flashed from the oracles of God in relation to the law and the gospel, in relation to the fact that Christ is our righteousness, which seemed to souls who were hungry for the truth, as light too precious to be received" (*Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 356). I felt like the young pastor at that Kansas camp meeting who "saw that it was his privilege to be justified by faith; he had peace with God, and with tears confessed what relief and blessing had come to his soul" (*ibid.*).

Since that experiential introduction to gospel assurance while I was a young pastor, the beauty of righteousness by faith has grown ever more precious. I must confess that sometimes it still seems almost too good to be true! I catch myself unconsciously falling back into old habit patterns of trying to be good enough to deserve salvation, and have to discover anew the joyous truth of "laying the glory of man in the dust" and trust wholly in Christ's righteousness.

Contrary to what I once thought, and to what many in 1888 feared, the message of

assurance in Christ's righteousness does not lead to cheap grace. "Its fruit is unto holiness" (*ibid.*, p. 359; cf. Rom. 6:22). I have found that only as I trust wholly in the merits of my Substitute and Surety can I truly obey God in spirit as well as in letter. Before internalizing the good news of justification by faith, I had tried to "depend upon watchfulness against temptation, and the performance of certain duties for acceptance with Him," and discovered that indeed "there are no victories in this kind of faith." Then came the glorious revelation: "There is need of constant watchfulness, and of earnest, loving devotion; but these will come naturally when the soul is kept by the power of God through faith. . . . God will accept every one that comes to Him trusting wholly in the merits of a crucified Saviour. Love springs up in the heart. . . . Duty becomes a delight, and sacrifice a pleasure" (*ibid.*, pp. 353, 354).

I have also discovered that the Christian life is a matter of continual growth, and if in the growing process I make mistakes, this does not rob me of my assurance. Just as a child taking his first steps is not disowned by his father when he trips and tumbles, so my heavenly Father does not cast me off when I slip and fall (see Ps. 37:24). I've often had to bow down and weep at Jesus' feet because of my shortcomings and mistakes, yet on divine authority I am not to be discouraged. Even if I am overcome by the enemy, I am not cast off, not forsaken, not rejected by God (see *Steps to Christ*, p. 64). Christ's perfect holiness atones for my shortcomings; when I do my best, He becomes my righteousness (see *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 368). The Father beholds not my faulty char-

acter, but sees me as clothed in Christ's perfection (see *The Desire of Ages*, p. 357).

As John the Beloved put it: "I am writing this to you so that you may not sin; but if any one does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John 2:1, RSV). What reassurance of assurance God has given!

I am thankful that my assurance is not dependent upon my feelings. I cannot look within myself for evidence of my acceptance with God, for I will find there nothing but that which will discourage. My only hope lies in looking to Jesus, my righteousness, my consolation, and my rejoicing (see *Steps to Christ*, pp. 64, 65; cf. Ps. 51; Isa. 6).

I rejoice that as I continue to keep my eyes upon Christ, my righteousness, the promised result is inevitable: my repentance will ever deepen, and at the same time, by beholding I will become changed—"transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory" (2 Cor. 3:18, NIV; see *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 160; *Steps to Christ*, p. 65).

Precious Doctrine

How precious the doctrine of Christian assurance is to me! But I also wish to underscore that the doctrine of the judgment is now just as precious!

In the years following 1888, some proponents of Christian assurance (e.g., Albion Ballenger) felt that this doctrine could not be reconciled with the Adventist teaching concerning the pre-Advent investigative judgment of the saints, and consequently chose to retain the former and reject the latter. This view has again been championed



G. I. Butler, president of the General Conference, stayed at home in Battle Creek during the Minneapolis meetings because of illness. He strongly supported Uriah Smith's views.

"Then Jesus declared, 'I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty. But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe. All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day'" (John 6:35-40, NIV).

by some Adventists in recent years. But the biblical evidence forthcoming (especially since 1980) from the Daniel and Revelation Committee and other sources is persuasive: it is not a matter of choosing either Christian assurance or the investigative judgment. Both are solid biblical doctrines. What is more, the judgment involves an examination of the saints' works, as Adventists have consistently maintained.

The Christian church has long wrestled with how we can have assurance of salvation totally by grace, and yet be judged by our works. But I have become convinced that Seventh-day Adventists, with their unique message of the antitypical day of atonement now in heavenly session, can preach these two doctrines with greater harmony, clarity, and power than any preceding generation. The Day of Atonement contains the key to holding in balance the relationship between grace and works, assurance and judgment.

This balance is illustrated by the placement of the most crucial Day of Atonement passage, Leviticus 16. Recent studies have shown how the entire Pentateuch (five books of Moses) is arranged in a chiasmic, or "mountain," structure, in which the "sides" of the Pentateuchal "mountain" match each other and the apex of the mountain contains the central focusing point of the whole (see Yehuda Radday, "Chiasm in Tora," *Linguistica Biblica* 19 [1972]: 21-23; and Wil-

liam Shea, "Literary Form and Theological Function in Leviticus," in Frank Holbrook, ed., *The Seventy Weeks, Leviticus, and the Nature of Prophecy*, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series [Washington, D.C.: Biblical Research Institute, 1968], vol. 3, pp. 131-168).

Observe the diagram that accompanies this article. Note that the central chapter of the book of Leviticus, and of the whole Pentateuch, is Leviticus 16, which focuses upon the Day of Atonement. If this chapter forms the apex of the entire Mosaic law of types and figures, certainly Adventists need not be ashamed to proclaim the antitypical day of atonement as the crucial and unique present truth for spiritual Israel at the end of time!

But placement of the Day of Atonement in the heart of Leviticus has more to say to us than underscoring its importance. Notice from the diagram that the book of Leviticus is divided into two halves, each with a different emphasis. In chapters 1-15 the underlying theme is

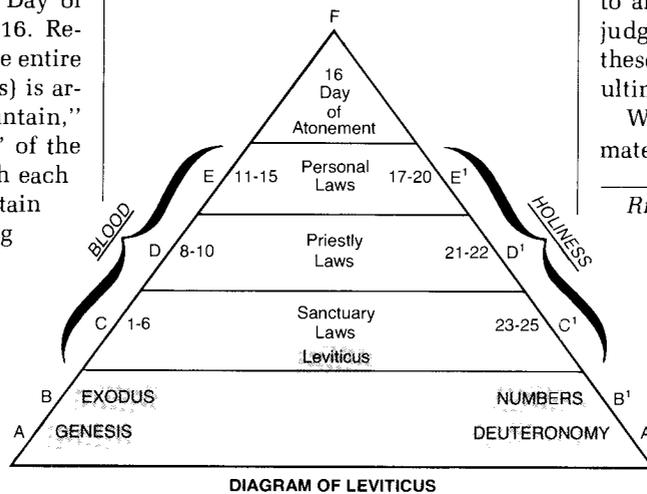
blood. Almost everywhere we find blood, sacrifice, and substitutionary atonement. But in the latter half of the book, chapters 17-27, blood is almost never mentioned. Instead, the overriding theme becomes holiness. And right in the middle stands chapter 16, the Day of Atonement.

I am convinced that we can fully appreciate the *significance* of the Day of Atonement only when we see it in its setting in Leviticus. Building up to the Day of Atonement, we see blood, substitutionary sacrifice—in New Testament terms, justification. Assurance in the Day of Atonement is based solely upon the blood of the substitute. Yet from Leviticus 16 onward, the rest of the book presents a call to holiness, to sanctification. The Day of Atonement thus ties together blood and holiness, justification and sanctification.

We are saved by blood, by grace; but we are judged by our works of holiness, the natural fruit of atoning grace. The efficacy of the blood becomes manifest to all by its holy fruit. Assurance and judgment—in the Day of Atonement these two concepts meet and take on ultimate meaning.

Will you let them join and have ultimate meaning in your life? □

Richard M. Davidson is chairman of the Old Testament Department at the SDA Theological Seminary at Andrews University.



"But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:30).