

“OUR HOPE: JESUS AND THE JUSTICE OF GOD”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Judgment of Sin (1 Peter 3:18; John 5:24)

For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit. [Jesus speaking], “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life.”

Judgment of Self (1 Corinthians 11:2-32)

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. ²⁷Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. ²⁸But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself, if he does not judge the body rightly. For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep. ³¹But if we judged ourselves rightly, we should not be judged. ³²But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord in order that we may not be condemned along with the world.

The Great White Throne Judgment (Revelation 20:11-15)

And I saw a Great White Throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. ¹²And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. ¹³And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. ¹⁴And death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. ¹⁵And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown

into the lake of fire.

The Judgment Seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10,11; 1 Corinthians 3:9-15)

For we must all appear before the Judgment Seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. ¹¹Therefore knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men, but we are made manifest to God; and I hope that we are made manifest also in your consciences.

For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building. ¹⁰According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building upon it. But let each man be careful how he builds upon it. ¹¹For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹²Now if any man builds upon the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, ¹³each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it, because it is to be revealed with fire; and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work which he has built upon it remains, he shall receive a reward. ¹⁵If any man's work is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire.

The writer of Hebrews was a man with a pastor's heart. With an under-shepherd's compassion and concern, he deals fairly, but firmly, with the full spectrum of teachings which he knows his flock must hear.

Most of the time his message is joyous and hopeful as he discusses the marvelous provisions of God's amazing grace. At other times, his emphasis is somber and serious, as he deals with the awesome, inescapable responsibilities resting on the recipients of that grace.

Thus it is that we find, threading through this book fraught with hope, a recurring theme of judgment. No exposition of the book of Hebrews would be complete without some explanation of the Biblical teaching regarding judgment, particularly the little known, little understood revelation regarding the Judgment Seat of Christ. Without a clear grasp of the Biblical doctrine of

judgment, and that aspect of it which applies to Christians, we can, and many have, become hopelessly bogged down in needless theological controversy over passages in the book of Hebrews which appear to be in conflict with other portions of scripture.

Therefore, in preparation for a look at sections of Hebrews many expositors feel are among the most difficult to interpret in the entire New Testament (6:4-12; 10:2-39), we turn now to the subject of judgment.

A little five-year-old was busy one day with her colors and coloring book. Her mother watched her for some time with great interest. The child was thoroughly engrossed in what she was doing. Finally, the mother said, “What are you drawing, Mary?” The little girl answered, “I’m making a picture of God.” Her mother replied, “But, Mary, nobody knows what God looks like.” With an expression of triumph on her face, the little girl said, “They will now!”

What does God look like? Is He “sugar and spice and all things nice”? Is He a kind of cosmic Cheshire cat sitting on some sunny slope, gazing down indulgently upon the sinfulness of man with a sickly smile frozen on His face?

Is He, as someone has described Him, “a big, genial, expansive benevolence with about as much moral authority as Father Christmas, One who can be trusted completely to deal leniently with the sinner and his sin”? Is He “an easygoing deity with the vertebrae of a jellyfish” who can be manipulated and wheedled into winking good-naturedly at our rebellious disobedience?

There are people who believe in a God like that. One German philosopher said blithely, “Forgiveness? Of course, God will forgive you. That’s what He’s for!” In reaction against the savage, bare, cold, dark-ages concept of an aloof, indifferent and far-removed God, our generation has fashioned a God more to its liking. But is this feeble, mushy, sickly concept of God reliable? Is it Biblical? Is it childlike or childish? Simple or naive? Is God’s love nothing more than shallow sentiment? Is He all sweetness and smiles? Or is there a somber side to God’s

countenance?

For the answer we must turn to Jesus. Many times we look at a boy and say, “He’s a chip off the old block. He’s the spitting image of his father.” Well, Jesus is like that. He is a photograph of His Father. If we want to know what God is like, we need only look at Jesus.

When we look at Jesus, what do we see? We see love. Compassion. Mercy. Tenderness. Goodness. Graciousness. Understanding. Forgiveness. But is that all? No! We also see the flashing fire of righteous indignation as He drives the money changers from God’s temple. We see the gaze of cutting contempt for the false religiosity of the Pharisees as He denounces them with such words as “*whited sepulchres*,” “*generation of vipers*,” “*hypocrites*,” “*fools*,” “*blind*.”

We see loving arms extended, inviting whosoever will to drink from the fountain of life without having to pay (Revelation 21:6), but we also hear Him deliver such phrases as, “*The gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life . . .*” (Matthew 7:14). “*Not every one who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven*” (Matthew 7:21).

No, if we look into the face of Jesus we do not see a Cheshire cat’s frozen grin. We see love and compassion, but we find them intermingled with tears of grief as He contemplates the impending judgment of those who reject their day of grace.

We need only to see Christ standing above the city of Jerusalem with head and heart bowed to know there is a somber side to God’s face. We need only to hear Him crying out, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . how often I wanted to gather your children together the way a hen gathers her chicks . . . and you were unwilling. Behold, your house is being left to you desolate” (Matthew 23:37,38). We need only to hear this to know that after the day of opportunity comes the day of judgment.

Someone has said, “If it is idolatry to worship a false metal image of God, it is also idolatry to worship a false mental image of God.” Against the “half-a-Christ” our generation has served up to

please the tender minds of those who cannot bear the sight of a majestic God whose law is truth and whose judgment is sure, we need to proclaim the Christ of the New Testament.

When we see that Christ -- the Christ who put the dark, bubbling cup of man's sin to His lips and drank it dry; the Christ who picked up the staggering burden of man's rebellion and bore it to the hill of Calvary that it might be nailed with Him to a cross - - when we see that Christ, we know God is not “sugar and spice and all things nice.” There is a somber side to God's countenance.

The Bible teaches there will be several judgments. For our purposes, we will look at four: the judgment of sin, the judgment of self, the Great White Throne judgment, and the Judgment Seat of Christ.

Judgment of Sin

The judgment of sin took place nearly 2,000 years ago when Jesus Christ, bearing the sins of the world, was taken to a place called Golgotha and nailed to a cross. It was then God dealt fully and finally with sin. “*For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God. . .*”(I Peter 3: 18). The Apostle Paul adds the glorious and hopeful note, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).

The Bible is plain beyond any shadow of doubt that when a person receives Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, he “*does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life*” (John 5:24). No Christian will ever appear at the Great White Throne judgment. His sins have already been judged at Calvary, and he has “*eternal life*” (John 3:16).

Jesus gives us a beautiful description of our place of safekeeping as Christians. “*My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand*”(John 10:27-29, emphasis mine).

Two hands are mentioned here: the hand of the Son (verse 28) and the hand of the Father (verse 29). Jesus says those who trust in Him are in the hollow of His hand and no one or nothing is able to extricate them from His firm grasp.

Then, to make our security absolutely clear, He goes on to explain that the Father's hand is also involved in our safekeeping, and no one can pluck us out of the Father's hand. Where are you and I as sinner-saints? Safe in the hollow between the hands of the Father and the Son! Excuse me, but hallelujah!

To fix this wonderful fact firmly in your mind, cup your left hand. Think of it as the hand of Jesus. Picture yourself nestled snugly in that hollow. Now, cup your right hand. Think of it as the Father's hand. Cover your left hand by placing your right hand over it. Where are you? Safe in the hollow of the Father's and Son's clasped hands! Remember that the next time you doubt your salvation. Remember that, when the devil assaults you with concern about your security in Christ. Both Father and Son are involved in your safekeeping. Theirs is a grasp from which no one or nothing can ever pluck you away!

Judgment of Self

The second judgment is the judgment of self. *“But if we judged ourselves rightly we should not be judged”* (1 Corinthians 11:31). What does that mean? Another verse adds light. *“If we confess our sins, He [God] is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins . . .”* (1 John 1:9). If you realize you are wrong, admit it. Don't wait for God to chasten you. Sooner or later a judgment of sin must come. It is better that you and I judge ourselves than be judged by God.

As I write this, I have in front of me a news clipping about a couple found in a hotel room in New York City, apparently the victims of a suicide pact. Each left behind a mate and children. Each left a note. The woman's note read as follows, “e had been accustomed to laugh at the moral law, Fred and I. We had said it was a man-made law to frighten timid people into being

good. Now we've learned through sad personal experience, ‘he wages of sin is death.’” Too late this couple discovered what it means to face a judgment of self. Unfortunately, when they faced themselves, they didn’t handle it creatively in the love of God, but took punishment upon themselves rather than hasten to the cross where they would have found forgiveness.

Someone has said the basis of conversion is a willingness to admit one is a sinner. If a man is not a sinner, for him there is no Savior. For him, Christ’s gospel has no appeal. Jesus said, *“I did not come to call good folk but sinners to repentance”* (Matthew 9:13). The Bible says, *“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”* (Romans 3:23). So, if we wish to escape the judgment of God upon our sin, we must be willing and ready to judge ourselves. To confess our sin. To repent of our sin; that is, to turn away from and stop doing that which defiles the image of God in us.

Sometimes that requires ruthless and painful surgery, removing us from people, practices and places which are destructive. We must confess, repent, make a beeline to Calvary, and there find the blessing, healing, cleansing and forgiveness God offers.

The Great White Throne Judgment

If we are not willing to do this, if we are not willing to seek insight about ourselves, face what we see, call our sin by its proper name, go to the cross and have it handled there, then we must face the third judgment mentioned in scripture: the judgment of the Great White Throne (Revelation 20:11).

There are several verses of scripture which record what Jesus said about the fate of those who eliminate God, His love and His son from their lives. As we go through them, notice He prefaces each reference to judgment with a statement of God’s love. We can never appreciate the judgment of God apart from the fact of God’s caring. A caring so fantastic He took upon Himself the full force of judgment when, in the person of Jesus Christ, He sought to reconcile the world to Himself through the cross.

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world; but that the world should be saved through Him” (John 3:16,17). With that preface clearly asserting God’s love, notice what comes next. *“He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God”* (John 3:18). *“He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him”* (John 3:36). In the Gospel of Matthew we read, *“And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life”* (Matthew 25:46).

Each of these verses speaks of judgment in some form. Perish. Condemn. Eternal punishment. Wrath of God. The person using this strong language is not some Old Testament prophet raining down fire and brimstone upon a hard-hearted people. The spokesman is the loving and gentle Jesus who said God is a Father, affirming by every act and attitude the insight of the psalmist who said, *“Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him”* (Psalm 103:13).

This is the sweet and compassionate Jesus who spoke about a God of love knowing how to give good gifts to His children (Matthew 7:11). This is the beautiful Savior whose outstretched arms beckon all men everywhere to come unto Him (Matthew 11:28), and find peace for their souls and a satisfying sense of security that banishes the fear of life and of death.

But this loving, gentle, sweet, compassionate, beautiful Jesus also knew there is a somber side to God's face. So he spoke of perishing. Condemnation. Judgment. The wrath of God. He wanted everyone everywhere to know it is a fearful thing to face God as judge!

What is the nature of God’s judgment? Someone has defined it in a single word: recognition. Just as a mother knows her child because of the characteristics of heredity or the reality of adoption

(both birth and adoption have beautiful Biblical overtones), so, too, God knows His children because they bear the image of His Son.

Judgment, then, is a matter of recognition. The person who has been born again by faith in Christ has taken on the likeness of Christ. When he who has been recreated in the image of Christ dies and enters the presence of God, there is instant recognition. He stands before God not as a stranger, but as one of the family. One whom God recognizes as His own.

But, even as a mother knows that all the kids on the block are not hers, so too God knows there are those who are not His. When such a person dies and goes to stand before God, there is no recognition. Only those dread words: “*I never knew you [I don't recognize you]; depart from Me*” (Matthew 7:23). And that’s hell! The product of recognition is acceptance and welcome. The result of non-recognition is separation. Total and final!

None of us has ever known what such separation is really like. Some have felt loneliness and alienation. Others have known what it is to be unwanted, perhaps unloved, on the human level. But no one has ever experienced the meaning of total separation from God. The end product of non-recognition is not alienation. That already exists. It is final separation. In this day of grace, God continues to woo people. Even though we may abandon Him, He doesn't abandon us. But when the day of grace is over and judgment comes, separation -- utter, final, and complete -- will occur. And that’s hell!

Now, whenever we talk about judgment, the question is raised, How can a loving God condemn anyone to hell? The answer, of course, is He doesn’t. God does not condemn people. He merely judges them.

Dr. Paul Kopp provides helpful insight when he says the doctor who accurately diagnoses an ailment as fatal unless his patient submits to surgery does not condemn that patient. He only judges him. If, overestimating his health, the man underestimates the doctor’s diagnosis and dies,

the patient condemns himself.

In like fashion, Jesus is painfully blunt about our condition. Men are lost, He said. They are sinners He came to seek and save (Luke 19:10). They are suffering from spiritual death (figure 4-A in chapter 8), and must yield to a divine operation in order to receive spiritual life. He called it being “*born again*” (John 3:3). If we ignore His diagnosis and refuse to submit to spiritual surgery, we perish. But the condemnation is ours. Not His. We have condemned ourselves.

William James speaks of “life’s living option.” He points out that every man has a choice to make. Every man has the ability to make that choice. There are consequences to the choice he makes. And, while the man is choosing, he is in one of the choices! In other words, he is in life’s living option.

Dr. Kopp brings this into focus with the illustration of a man whose car is stalled on a railroad track. A train is rapidly approaching. The man is in life’s living option. He has a choice to make. He can get out of the car and live. Or he can stay in the car and die. But while he’s making up his mind, he’s in one of the alternatives. He’s in the car.

Or again, the man with a serious ailment who is told by his doctor he must have an operation or die, is in life’s living option. A choice must be made: operation or no operation. The consequences are life or death. But while he’s making up his mind, he’s in one of the alternatives. He’s dying.

Move that over into the matter of spiritual judgment. Jesus said, “*For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world; but that the world should be saved through Him. He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already . . .*” (John 3:17. 18). What did He mean? He meant every man is in life’s living option. He has a choice to make. He may accept Christ, receive eternal life and go to heaven when he dies, or, he may reject Christ and remain spiritually dead. When he dies physically, he faces the judgment of God for his sin.

But, while he’s making up his mind, he’s in one of the choices. He is without Christ. Therefore, according to Jesus, he is “*condemned already*.” God does not condemn him. God merely judges him. He condemns himself.

The final judgment of God at the Great White Throne will not catch the sinner by surprise. Throughout his lifetime he will have been judged by God a thousand times in a thousand ways. He will have been judged by the memory of a Christian mother’s prayers. By the influence of a godly wife. By the witness of a faithful teacher. By the preaching of a Good News preacher.

He will have been judged by the message of scripture. By the singing of a gospel song. By the sweet innocence of a little child. By the testimony of a loving friend. No person, at least in this country of ours, will be able to stand before God and say, “I never knew. I never had a chance to receive and confess Christ as Lord.”

Nor will he be able to plead the fifth amendment. It will do no good on that day to say, “I refuse to testify on the grounds it may tend to incriminate me.” With infinite knowledge of the human heart, God will simply flash upon the picture screen of heaven every evil thought, act and attitude. Instantaneously he will know why, in God’s sight, a man outside of Christ is “*condemned already*.”

It really isn’t necessary for any person to stand before God at the Great White Throne. When Jesus died on the cross, God judged sin for all time to come. And, “*therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature . . .*” (2 Corinthians 5:17). The ugly, dark past is gone, and “*there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*” (Romans 8:1).

I remind you, dear reader, if you have never received Jesus as your Savior, you are in life’s living option. You face the greatest choice a man or woman can face. You have the ability to make it. You are equipped with free will. Right now you have the opportunity to choose Jesus, receive eternal life, and know heaven will be your home. Or, you may reject Him, die and face final

separation from God.

While you are reaching a decision, you are in one of the options. You are without Christ and are “*condemned already*.” So, if you have not already done so, I urge you, respond to His love. Open your heart to Him. Receive Christ as Savior and move from death to life.

The Judgment Seat of Christ

There is another judgment about which I’m compelled to write. It is the judgment of works. Or what the scripture calls the Judgment Seat of Christ. In his letter to the Jesus folk at Corinth, Paul writes these heart-stopping words, “*For we must all appear before the Judgment Seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad*” (2 Corinthians 5:10).

When you faced the fact of yourself, made a beeline to the cross, accepted God’s judgment of your sin and received Jesus as your Savior, at that moment you were born again. Your guilt was blotted out. Your sin was taken away. You were saved for time and eternity. The door of hell for you was slammed shut. The door to heaven was opened. Forever!

But, having become a recipient of God’s grace, you are now responsible to God’s grace. You are under the judgment of works. There will come a day when every child of God will stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ to give an account of his fidelity and service. The Bible is not entirely specific as to when or where this judgment of saved-sinners will occur, but every Christian will have his works inspected. His service graded. His obedience evaluated. The totality of his performance as God's child exposed to the test of the refiner’s fire.

“For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man builds upon the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man’s work will become evident; for the day will show it, because it is to be revealed with fire; and the fire itself will test the quality of each man’s work. If the work which any man has built

on the foundation survives, he shall receive a reward” (1 Corinthians 3:11-14).

What a happy thought! Faithfulness will not pass unnoticed. The Bible is replete with references to rewards, crowns, and various stations in the life beyond (Matthew 5:12; 6:4; 6:18; 10:41; 25:14-30; 25:31-46). Characteristically, the most deserving will be least willing to retain their rewards and will fashion them into trophies of love to lay at Jesus’ feet.

But all God’s children will not fare so well. *“If any man’s work is burned up, he shall suffer [painfully experience] loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire”* (1 Corinthians 3:15). There is a positive aspect to this, of course. It means all the trash and ugliness which have cluttered our thoughts and actions on earth will be consumed. In heaven we will be perfect. Thank God for that. But the painful part is that many carnal Christians will have little left with which to fashion a love gift for Jesus! That’s the real terror of the Judgment Seat of Christ.

Do you see it, fellow Christian? Each recipient of grace is responsible to grace. Each of us, from the moment of conversion, is under the judgment of works. One day we will stand before Christ to have our lives examined. For those who have run faithfully and well, it will be a joyous moment.

Others, sad to say, will get into heaven as Lot got out of Sodom -- burned out! They will stand before the Lord with empty hands. They will greet Jesus who loved them and gave Himself for them with nothing to lay at His feet as a way of saying thank you. What a tragic moment that will be!

It is the Judgment Seat of Christ to which the book of Hebrews is related. In fact, we simply cannot comprehend certain sections of this book (6:4-12; 10:26-39), until we understand the Biblical teaching regarding this particular aspect of judgment. When we get straight on that and realize our salvation is no longer at stake, but, as Christians, we are responsible for our behavior as believers, then we cannot gloss over what the Spirit of God would say to us in the “hard”

passages of this epistle. They speak to our situation. Our lives. Our need. And, we must take them to heart.

A famous painter, well-known for the careful manner with which he went about his work, was approached one day by a friend who asked him why he painted with such care. His answer was one we would all do well to remember. “I am painting for eternity.”

Dear Christian reader, there is nothing more sober or serious I can say to you than this: live with eternity’s values in view! Don’t let the world force you into its mold. Reject that distorted way of thinking which turns trinkets into treasures, and treasures into trinkets!

Based on their performance, some Christians seem to believe that, having become a Christian, it doesn’t matter how they live. They appear to feel free to do as they please. To ignore God’s edicts if they wish. To tithe or not tithe. To worship or not worship. To serve or not serve. To witness or not witness.

The Bible says otherwise, “*For whatever a man sows, this he will also reap*” (Galatians 6:7). God alone knows how many campers, new cars, boats, homes, wardrobes, kids, family or friends have been supported at God’s expense. Christians guilty of this misappropriation of God’s funds will be judged. There’s nothing wrong with campers. Or new cars, boats, nice homes, clothes, sending one’s kids to college, or supporting hard-up friends or family. If they are acquired or done via some sacrifice other than robbing God.

The tragedy for the Christian who tries to acquire acceptable, even worthy things on his own terms by robbing God, is that he never gives God a chance to prove His promises. He walks by sight, not faith. He never experiences the thrill of seeing God invade his situation and do the impossible, that is, meet a need, when from human perspective there is no way on earth that need can be met. The man is a double loser. He loses in time. And he loses in eternity when he stands at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

It is solemn to contemplate the fact that the future will be the harvest of the present. Yet that is what scripture says. “*Whatever a man sows, this he will also reap*” (Galatians 6:7). Eternal issues are at stake in what you are and do today. For sometime, somewhere, every child of God will be asked to give an accounting. Your work, life, time, stewardship, use and misuse of opportunity, will be tested by the fire of God’s judgment. If it survives, there will be rejoicing. If it is consumed, there will be regret. “*Saved as by fire,*” to meet the Lord Jesus with empty hands.

Look at your priorities. At your lifestyle. At the subtle ways in which the world has crowded you into its mold. Then do something about what you see. You can’t undo yesterday’s mistakes. Or recapture yesterday’s missed opportunities. But you can do everything in the world about today. And tomorrow. And all the tomorrows God in His grace gives you. Sieze the opportunity. If necessary, reorder your priorities, and build. Not just for time, but for eternity.

Notes

1. Paul W. Kopp, “Life by Choice” (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Baptist City Mission Society, 427 W. 5 Street, Los Angeles, CA 90013, 1965).