


2

THE GREAT JUDGMENT

“’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear” (John Newton).¹



In March of 1758, John Wesley was invited to preach in St. Paul’s Church in Bedford, England. The invitation was extended by Sir Edward Clive, who was one of the judges of His Majesty’s Court, King George II. According to Wesley, the crowd was very large and very attentive and many of those in attendance were officials of the court.

Wesley chose this occasion to preach on “The Great Assize” (“assize” is the old English word for “judgment”). In this message, which Wesley considered to be the best message he had ever written or preached on the subject, he called on those court officials in attendance who pass and execute judgment on others to consider carefully that God the Son, at the second coming, was going to pass judgment on them! He reminded them that everyone without exception was going to have to give an account of themselves before Christ, not only for their actions but also for their words and thoughts. And he reminded those who had the task of pronouncing persons either guilty or innocent would they themselves stand before a judge and be either acquitted or condemned. They would hear the joyful words, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world” (Matthew 25:34), or they would hear the dreadful words, “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (v. 41). And Wesley encouraged those officials to live in fearful anticipation of that future judgment so that they might be properly motivated to live holy lives. He considered serious reflection on the future judgment a worthy motivation for the pursuit of holiness.

The message was evidently well received. The judge invited Wesley to dinner following the service, and the sheriff of the county encouraged Wesley to publish the sermon, which Wesley did the following summer and which he included in the 1771 edition of his *Sermons*. This, of course, wasn't the first time John Wesley preached about the rewards and punishments that are in every person's future. Heaven, hell, judgment, and the second coming were all recurring themes in much of John Wesley's preaching. "The Great Assize" was simply his best.

Contrary to Wesley, and except for the occasional funeral sermon, I was eighteen years into my pastoral ministry before I ever preached an "end of days" or "last times" type sermon—that is, one about either judgment or the second coming, or heaven or hell. (I had to ask my congregation's forgiveness for that omission when I finally did preach what Christ himself had spoken of so often.) The reason for my eventual preaching on the second coming was my decision to follow the *Revised Common Lectionary*, which is a resource for pastors and which recommends Bible texts for every Sunday of the church year. I was growing more and more aware that my responsibility to my congregation was to preach the whole counsel of God and not simply what I was comfortable with preaching or what I thought acceptable to my people. When I sat down to create a calendar in which the primary claims of the Christian faith were addressed systematically from the pulpit, I discovered the lectionary, which had been in use in other church traditions for hundreds of years. Thus, my commitment to preaching the whole counsel of God as prescribed by the lectionary led me to discover that preaching on the second coming of Christ was to be an annual event. As a matter of fact, the gospel reading for the first Sunday of Advent is Jesus' instruction for careful watchfulness in anticipation of his coming again, which is what John Wesley had preached to those court officials in Bedford, England. From the thirteenth chapter of the gospel of Mark, Jesus says:

At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens. . . . No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven,

nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.

Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: “Watch!” (Vv. 26-27, 32-37)

Now, my reasons for not preaching from this passage or passages like this one were many. I had grown up listening to “end times” preaching of evangelists and had not appreciated how easily hearers could be manipulated through such messages. I had heard preachers predict the imminent return of Christ so often that I had become a little skeptical of his returning, at least in my lifetime. I thought that choices made to follow Christ out of fear were not the right motivation for discipleship. But mostly, I did not want to preach on the second coming of Christ or on judgment or on hell, or even heaven, because I was afraid that specific part of the message of the gospel would be offensive to people and therefore would not be received.

The problem, however, which I have already mentioned, was that I wasn't telling my people the whole story. John Wesley certainly understood that one of the minister's tasks was to reveal the wrath of God toward sinners, as his comment on Romans 1:18 makes clear. He wrote, “The wrath of God is revealed - Not only by frequent and signal interpositions of divine providence, but likewise in the sacred oracles, and by us, his messengers.”² From my pulpit, however, I preached an edited gospel. I was presumptuous enough to think that I ought to be the one determining exactly what parts of Christ's message were appropriate for their ears; that is, until God spoke to me concerning that belief and its motivation. In a definitive and formative encounter in my study one afternoon, God whispered with clarity and force, *You need to be more afraid of me than your people*. At that moment, God revealed that I was motivated more by the praise of people than by my love for him, and in that short word of discipline, he reminded me that I was go-

ing to be held accountable, ultimately, not by my church people or denomination, but by God himself. It was then that I began telling my church the whole story of God as expressed in the authoritative written Word of God and reiterated in the creeds.

That message expressed in the written Word of God and in the tradition of the church is that God's character of holy love demands wrath toward sin, which is expressed as judgment. While that message may not be heard very much these days, it is neither ignored in the Bible, nor in the ecumenical creeds, nor in our particular theological tradition. The apostle Paul, in his letter to the church at Rome, for example, began his argument with these disconcerting words: "The wrath of God is being revealed against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness" (Romans 1:18). It should be noted that God's wrath toward the wickedness of people is not a minor theme in this epistle and that Paul returns to it again and again. After cataloguing all the sins that are worthy of such judgment, the apostle Paul wrote that those who do such things deserve death (v. 32), that God will visit his judgment on those who self-righteously judge others (2:3), that people who do not repent are storing up wrath for themselves (v. 5), that God is going to give to each person according to what he or she has done (v. 6), that there will be distress and anguish for those who do evil (v. 9), that the final judgment and expression of God's wrath will take place at the last day when God will make known all the secrets of men's hearts (v. 16), that the inevitable consequence of sin is death (6:23), that all will stand before God's judgment seat (14:10), and that every single person will have to give an accounting of himself or herself before God (v. 12).

This is a theme that the apostle Paul repeated in all of his letters. In his first letter to the church at Corinth, after identifying the people of God as God's temple, Paul wrote: "If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple" (1 Corinthians 3:17). In his second letter to that same church, he wrote that the goal for every believer was to live a life pleasing to God, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Corinthi-

ans 5:10). The apostle Paul called the churches of Galatia to generosity and humility by reminding them that God could not be mocked and that if they lived stingy and proud lives, they would reap their own destruction instead of eternal life (Galatians 6:7-8). To the church at Philippi, Paul wrote that the destiny of those who were enemies of the cross was that same future destruction (Philippians 3:18-19). And in a second letter to the Thessalonians, Paul used perhaps his strongest language when writing about the destiny of those who reject God's overtures:

God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. (2 Thessalonians 1:6-10a)

Of course, Paul was not writing to those first-century churches anything that Jesus hadn't previously said. As a matter of fact, it can be argued that Jesus' standard for judgment was even more critically penetrating than the apostle Paul's. A summary reading of the Sermon on the Mount indicates this, for according to Matthew 5—7, there will be judgment, not simply for murder but for anger, not simply for adultery but for lust, not only for how friends are loved but how enemies are loved as well. Jesus' expectation for his followers in the Sermon on the Mount is nothing less than the perfection of the Father's love (Matthew 5:48)! Later, in that same gospel, Jesus declared that all will be judged according to every careless word ever spoken (12:36) and by how faithful all were to works of mercy (25:31-46). It perhaps should be noted that the New Testament also makes clear that it will be Christ himself who will sit on that throne of judgment, separating the righteous from the unrighteous. Jesus was even willing to tell those who would reject his message what they would hear on that day. It would be horrifying

to hear Jesus say either, “I never knew you,” or “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire” (7:23 and 25:41, respectively).

Finally, the last book of the Christian scriptures contains the most extensive description of the judgment day. John’s vision included this compelling revelation:

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:11-15)

In light of the consistent biblical message of the judgment following Christ’s second coming, it is no mystery why the church included in its creeds the clauses referring to the future judgment. In the Apostles’ Creed, which is the most familiar of the ecumenical creeds, the church confesses that after his ascension, Christ will “come again to judge the living and the dead.” The Nicene Creed states the same: “and He shall come again, with glory, to judge the living and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.” It is no mystery why almost every denomination has an article of faith that refers to the judgment. The Church of the Nazarene’s Article of Faith XVI, titled “Resurrection, Judgment, and Destiny,” states:

20. We believe in the resurrection of the dead, that the bodies both of the just and of the unjust shall be raised to life and united with their spirits—“they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.”

21. We believe in future judgment in which every person shall appear before God to be judged according to his or her deeds in this life.

22. We believe that glorious and everlasting life is assured to all who savingly believe in, and obediently follow, Jesus Christ our Lord; and that the finally impenitent shall suffer eternally in hell.³

Now historically this has not been a very appealing message to believers and nonbelievers alike, regardless of its biblical foundation. In our day, in which tolerance is considered the highest of virtues, the idea of judgment seems regressive, even contrary to the gospel. To many, the doctrine of judgment with its promise of eternal rewards and punishments is, at least, archaic and, at most, destructive. In light of the explicit universalism (all will be saved by God's grace) found in some Christian traditions and in light of the practical universalism making its way into the evangelical tradition, the current situation makes it necessary to provide a short explanation as to why the wrath of God—which leads to judgment—is entirely consistent with the love and grace of God.

To start, the Christian confession that God will come again to judge the living and the dead is the strongest possible indication of the honor and respect God has given to people created in his image; it implies that people have been given, by virtue of God's prevenient grace (the grace that comes to us before salvation, leading and pointing us to God), sufficient freedom for self-determination (the ability and right to make your own choices). If God is holding people accountable for their actions, then they must have, through God's grace, the ability to be responsible for their actions. Conversely, if there is no judgment, then it could be rightly concluded that persons are not ultimately responsible for what they do and who they are. If there is no judgment, it can be reasonably concluded that people are victims of circumstances beyond their control. While it would be naive and irresponsible to ignore the power of genetic and environmental forces to affect behavior, the Christian faith, with this doctrine of judgment, rejects the simplistic reduction of persons to the narrow status of victims. As Richard John Neuhaus wrote:

It is destructively depersonalizing to suggest that there is no right or wrong for which people are responsible. This is not to say that right and wrong are always clear and unambiguous, but it is to say that the most elementary respect for another person requires an acknowledgment

of that person as a responsible agent. We do that person no favors by reducing him or her to a bundle of compulsions and social and psychological conditionings.⁴

Thus, with this doctrine of judgment, the Christian faith powerfully declares that people, by the grace of God, are responsible for themselves and their actions, in spite of their fallen condition and the detrimental circumstances of their lives. In brief, God's judgment is an expression of the rightful honor and respect God has for those created in his image and empowered by his prevenient grace.

Along the same lines, the Christian confession that God will hold people accountable for what they do is the strongest possible affirmation that their actions are significant enough to God to warrant such attentive judgment. If God does not hold people created in his image accountable for what they do to themselves and others, then it might reasonably be concluded that he is indifferent to his creation. As a parent would express judgment toward the behavior of a child who is self-destructive or destructive to another, so God's judgment can be similarly understood. Just as a parent's love mandates appropriate expressions of disfavor to their child, God's love toward those created in his image mandates his wrath. A parent's love could be called into question if appropriate judgment was absent; so God's love could be called into question if judgment was absent from his love. As William M. Greathouse and George Lyons wrote in their commentary on the book of Romans, "God's wrath is the dark side of his faithfulness to his creatures . . . For God to spare them the consequences of their choice . . . would be to encourage them in self-destructive folly. God loves his creation too much to be an enabler."⁵

Thus, with this doctrine of judgment, the Christian faith powerfully reveals that what people do, and therefore who they are, matters to God. Judgment affirms the relational character of salvation. In short, God's judgment is an expression of his absolute interest in those created in his image and is an expression of his providential care for his creation. Judgment, therefore, is a consequence of God's character of holy love.

While the message that God's love requires judgment may not be heard very much these days, love and wrath have long been understood in the

Christian faith as complimentary, wrath being a necessary consequence of the holy character of God's love. Gustav Aulen, the Swedish Lutheran theologian, wrote powerfully of this relationship between love and wrath:

Christian faith has from the very beginning expressed [the] opposition of God to evil in the strongest terms. It has well understood that, if this feature is missing or even slightly obscured, love loses its essence and is reduced to a caricature of real divine love . . . The radical opposition of the divine will to evil becomes then in the last analysis the opposition of divine love itself . . . No opposition to evil can be more decisive and critical than the opposition of love. It lies in the very nature of love that it must react against that which is incompatible with itself.⁶

In full harmony with the Catholic-Protestant-Wesleyan-holiness tradition, H. Orton Wiley described this relationship between love and wrath:

Holiness then, is . . . a disposition or a nature which manifests itself in a love for righteousness and in a hatred for iniquity . . . The Christian position generally, is that wrath is but the obverse side of love . . . God revealed Himself in Jesus Christ as loving righteousness and hating iniquity; and the hatred of iniquity is as essential to [God] as the love of righteousness. Divine wrath, therefore, must be regarded as the hatred of iniquity, and is in some proper sense the same . . . which exercised towards righteousness is known as divine love.⁷

Thus, the Christian confession that God is wholly hostile to evil is demanded by his character. If God is holy love, then he must and will destroy sin for the sake of those created in his image and for the sake of his creation.

Regardless of our ability to appreciate fully the implications of God's wrath—which results in judgment—the testimony of the Scripture and the tradition of the Christian faith is clear: the destiny of each person is determined by the judgment of Christ. In light of this clear testimony, a prerequisite to renewing the call to holiness comes through a renewed understanding of the character of God, who is holy love, and who is, therefore, wholly hostile to evil, and who must and will hold people accountable. More specifically, if there is an anemic holiness movement today, it might be due partly to an

anemic understanding of the holy character of God, whose love demands that he hate sin and must destroy it.

Incidentally, when I began preaching the whole counsel of God, which included messages on judgment, the second coming, heaven, and hell, instead of being put off by the messages, the church was grateful and made more hopeful. Indeed, one honest parishioner responded with one word. He simply said, “Finally!”