

Section 2: Judgment in the House of God

The appointed time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God,
and if it begins with us, what will be the end of those who refuse to obey the gospel of God?
1Peter 4:17

Behold, therefore, the goodness and the severity of God,
toward those who have fallen, severity, but toward you, goodness –
if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise, you, too, shall be cut off.
Romans 11:22

The Privilege of Every Believer

The basic function and greatest benefit of government is to provide for the establishment and maintenance of right relationships. This is what Jesus accomplished in heaven when he cast Satan and his angels out, and in Sheol when he transferred all the righteous out of that dismal place to be with him. It is also what he accomplished on earth in the hearts of those who received him; he created the way for them to obtain a right relationship with God and with one another by purchasing for them the Spirit, that is, God's kind of life.

By nature, both men and animals are wild (cf. Jer. 10:14; Prov. 12:1), and fleshly nature will oppose God's order as long as the flesh is alive. The similarity between human nature and wild beasts prompted Peter to say that men who live according to their fleshly nature and "despise government" are "like unreasoning beasts" (2Pet. 2:12, 10). The best that human governments can do is to muzzle the dog so that it won't bite, but they cannot change the nature of the beast. It is the nature of the flesh, whether human or animal, to resist being governed because it thinks of being governed only as being controlled. However, God has no interest in controlling human nature; His form of government is to replace our nature with His so that we are freed from our natural rebelliousness and have the strength both to want to do His will and to do it. God's Spirit is the only source of righteousness in this covenant, as Paul told the Philippians, "It is God who is working within you, both to desire and to do according to *His* good pleasure" (Phip. 2:13).

Paul wrote, "The flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit desires what is contrary to the flesh" (Gal. 5:17), and what the flesh desires more than anything else is to live according to its own will, and it will do anything to keep living. The warfare Jesus fought and won in the wilderness was to subdue the will of his fleshly body and do God's will instead, and it is the privilege of every believer in this world not only to fight the same battle, but it is also their privilege to win that war. When Paul said, "I die daily" (1Cor. 15:31a), he was not complaining; he was rejoicing in his daily victory over his fleshly nature, won by the power of God's life within him.

Romans 6

6. Our old man is crucified with Christ so that our sinful body might be rendered powerless, to the end that we are no longer slaves to sin,
7. for he who is dead is freed from sin.
- ...
11. Think of yourselves as completely dead to sin, too, yet alive to God through Christ Jesus our Lord.

Colossians 3

1. If, therefore, you be raised up with Christ, seek things that are above, where Christ is sitting at God's right hand.
2. Keep your minds on things above, not on things on the earth.
3. For you are dead, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

Only the gospel of Christ Jesus can make it good news that we are dead, for if we are dead in Christ to sin, then we are alive to God, and that is very good news indeed! All who are alive to God have fellowship with Him and His Son, and with one another. That is the happy, peaceful life that God has always enjoyed with His Son, and in His Son, God has now made the way for us to rest with them in their joy.

God Is a Living God

Wherever the Son is, God's government is, because wherever the Son is, he is himself. He does not have to try to be Lord and Judge of all; he reigns simply by being the person that the Father created him to be. He does not wrestle against anything in order to be Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God. For him to live is, for him, to be God's Son, the King of kings and Lord of lords. Whenever Jesus spoke, "the multitudes were astonished, for he taught them as one having authority" (Mt. 7:28–29a), and it was natural for him to speak that way; he did not study the art of oratory. When Jesus preached in the villages of Galilee, or healed the sick by the sea, or taught in the temple in Jerusalem, he was only being himself, and those who saw him were seeing God's government in action. But that, in itself, was not a new thing.

God has always expressed His will and His judgments through a living being, that is, when He was not expressing them through nature. Noah, for example, was the expression of God's government in his time, and he built an ark "by which he condemned the world" (Heb. 11:7). God's government in the person of Noah put the world on trial and condemned it to death! The prophets, too, were visible expressions of God's government. The words they spoke carried authority equal with the law of Moses, and sometimes were superior to it (e.g., Lev. 20:10 vs. Hos. 3:1–3). It has already been shown that God, on occasion, commanded prophets to do deeds blatantly contrary to the law, such as sending Isaiah into the temple to father a child by a prophetess to whom Isaiah was not married (Isa. 8:1–3). God had authority to command such things because He is a living *who*, whereas the law was a dead *what*. God is perfectly free to do as He will, and whatever He does is good and right even if what He does today is different from what He did yesterday, or different from what He commanded man to do.

The message God sends on any given day takes precedence over the message He sent on any previous day. A story from 1Kings 20:35–36 emphatically makes this point. Long before that story took place, God sternly warned His people never to harm His prophets (Ps. 105:15). That was a standard almost everyone in Israel would have known about. On this occasion, however, God sent a prophet to a certain man commanding him to strike the prophet and wound him. The man refused to obey that new commandment, and as a result, he was cursed by God for *not* harming His prophet! God's commandment on that day was more authoritative than His previous commandment simply because it was newer; it was what God said that day as opposed to what He had said before.

The lesson that story teaches is that God's government is new each day because God is not a rule book. He is alive, each day observing and judging all things, and giving guidance as the situation requires. Being alive to what God is saying today is to know the truth, for the only truth that exists is what God is thinking right now. To live that way is what Paul called "walking in the Spirit" It is a life

of complete liberty from all rites and rules, a liberty so free that it frightens many of God's own children. But to make God's kind of liberty the law for us is the very reason Jesus came and suffered, for when God's life enters into us, His liberty comes with it, and it comes with authority. James said that we will be judged according to "the perfect law of liberty," that is to say that the standard for God's children is to be free from fleshly rites and rules, just as he is. It is the law in God's kingdom that His children be like Him. It is no wonder that when the Galatian believers began observing the Old Covenant's rites and rules, Paul was indignant:

Galatians

- 1a. O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you, that you should not obey the truth?
2. This only would I learn of you. Did you receive the Spirit by works of *the* law or by *the* preaching of faith?
3. Are you so foolish? Having begun in spirit, are you now perfected by flesh?

God's principal purpose in blessing us with His kind of life is that we may truly know Him, so that we no longer need consult a dead *what*, not even the Bible, to discover what God's will is. Jesus did not tell his disciples, "When the Bible is printed, it will guide you into all truth." Rather, he said, "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth" (Jn. 16:13). We know the truth only as we are led by the Spirit, for the Spirit alone knows the mind of God:

1Corinthians 2

- 10b. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God.
11. For who among men knows the things of man except the spirit of man that is in him?
Likewise, no one knows the things of God, except the Spirit of God.

We cannot truly know or acceptably worship the living God while depending on a *what* to guide us. God is a living God, and only when we are alive with Him can we distinguish His voice from all others. His is the tender voice about which Isaiah prophesied: "Your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, 'This is the way; walk in it'" (Isa. 30:21a), and every *who* sent from God echoes that voice.

As It Is in Heaven

As previously discussed, Jesus purged heaven after he ascended so that only right relationships exist in it now. He brought all of heaven into divine order when he cast Satan and his angels out. And John's description of Satan's fury when that happened to him (Rev. 12:12–17) teaches us that establishing a right relationship is not always a pleasant experience for everyone concerned. Nevertheless, God was pleased when Jesus established a right relationship—a very distant one—between Satan and heaven's faithful inhabitants. Likewise, recalcitrant believers often become angry and vindictive when Jesus, through his visible representative, puts them out of an Assembly and establishes a right relationship—a distant one—between them and the rest of the Assembly. That is, in fact, one way that Jesus' prayer is answered: "Let your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Mt. 6:10).

When Satan was cast out of heaven, the angels who were faithful to God rejoiced at their improved situation (Rev. 12:12a). Likewise, the wise children of God feel relief at the improved situation in their Assembly when an ungodly spirit is removed. Unfortunately, some of God's ministers are not Christ-like enough to put the ungodly out of the Assembly and give rest to the upright. When the apostle Paul learned of a case of gross immorality in the Corinthian Assembly, he sternly reprovved them for offering polluted worship to God by tolerating such sin. He demanded that they put the young man out of the Assembly in order to save the Assembly from his evil influence:

1 Corinthians 5

1. An immorality among you is widely reported, and such an immorality that is not even mentioned among Gentiles, in that a man has his father's wife!
2. And yet, you are puffed up, and have not mourned instead, so that the one who has done this deed might be put out from your midst.
3. As for me, absent in body but present in spirit, I have already judged, as if present, the one who has done such a thing.
4. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you and my spirit are gathered together, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ,
5. turn such a man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that the spirit might be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.
6. Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?

Verse two tells us that the Corinthians had become proud of how tolerant and forgiving they were, but that is foolishness. God is incomparably patient; were it not so, none of us would be saved. Peter plainly said so: "Consider the patience of our Lord to be salvation" (2Pet. 3:15a). That wonderful truth notwithstanding, in the appropriate time and in every case, God will prove Himself to be perfectly intolerant of wickedness among His people, and He has never forgiven anyone who did not first repent. Forgiveness without repentance is not forgiveness at all; it is an invitation to more sin.

When Peter said that judgment will begin at God's own house, he was echoing Jesus' arresting statement that before he returns, the body of Christ will be purged of every ungodly soul:

Matthew 13

40. Just as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so shall it be at the close of this age.
41. The Son of man will send forth his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all things that offend and those who do lawlessness,

Note that it is the household of God, not the world, that Jesus was describing:

Matthew 13

47. The kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea, and it gathered some of every sort,
48. which, after it was full, they drew onto the shore, and when they sat down, they collected the good ones into vessels, but threw the bad ones away.
49. So it will be at the close of the age. The angels will go forth and separate the evil from among the righteous.

God is pleased when His ministers are enough like His Son to cast out a stubbornly wicked person so that the fellowship of the remaining believers is unsullied. Christ is coming again, not for a mixed multitude of faithful and unfaithful believers, but for "a glorious Assembly without spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing" (Eph. 5:27b). Jesus would not have the body of Christ in the divided, confused state it is in today. Jesus is better than that, and he expects better than the present mess from us who believe. To teach that Jesus is coming back at any moment, as many do, is to hold him in very low esteem.

Paul was referring to the purging of the body of Christ before Jesus' return when he told the Corinthians that God was ready to avenge all disobedience when the obedience of His children was complete (2Cor. 10:6). But the obedience of God's representatives is key. His Corinthian ministers had failed miserably to execute the righteous judgments needed to keep that Assembly pure, and Paul was

displeased. “I say this to your shame” he told them. “Is it really so, that there is not a single wise man among you who is able to judge between his brothers?” (1Cor. 6:5).

Jesus was also displeased with such failures, and through the apostle John, he sent messages sharply rebuking certain of his ministers. To the pastor at Pergamon, he said,

Revelation 2

14. I have a few things against you because you have there some holding the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to lay a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat food offered to idols and to commit fornication.
15. And you also have there some who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans.
16. So, repent! Otherwise, I will come to you soon, and I will wage war against them with the sword of my mouth.

How was this servant of God to repent? The issue was that he was allowing believers to continue in his congregation who were stubbornly promoting false doctrines. Therefore, the only way for him to repent for that error was for him to put those believers out of his congregation.

For another example, Jesus sent this message to the pastor in Thyatira, whose domineering wife was out of order:

Revelation 2

20. I have against you that you put up with your wife—Jezebel!—who calls herself a prophetess, and teaches and seduces my servants to commit fornication and to eat things offered to idols.

In this case, the pastor had allowed the situation to continue too long. The time for repentance was passed. The pastor’s wife had refused the Spirit’s invitation to repent too many times, and now, a severe judgment was unavoidable. “And all the Assemblies will know I am the one who examines the minds and hearts, and I will give to each of you according to your deeds” (Rev. 3:23).

Paul once asked the question, “If someone does not know how to govern his own house, how will he take care of the Assembly of God?” (1Tim. 3:5). The answer is, he cannot. A basic requirement to be in a position of leadership in the body of Christ is that a man “govern his own house well, having children in subjection with all gravity” (1Tim. 3:4). My father, “Preacher Clark”, taught us that one can tell how close to God a man is by how well he handles his money and his young children, and I have witnessed the truth of that statement many times.

Judgment: Chastisement

The suffering that follows disobedience is classified as chastisement if the suffering is intended to correct and restore. John said that “all unrighteousness is sin” (1Jn. 5:17), and all sin has unsavory consequences. However, the love of God assures us that the consequences are always appropriate to the transgression. The consequence may be a gentle admonition, or it may be something much worse. Regardless of how harsh the consequence is, however, as long as it has a healing purpose, the souls who are facing the consequence of their actions have hope. God loves His wayward children and will administer whatever correction is needed to bring them back into fellowship with Him. Jesus told one pastor of his who had become particularly slack, “As many as I hold dear, I rebuke and chasten. Be zealous, therefore, and repent!” (Rev. 3:19). Jesus wanted him back.

Once wise children of God have tasted the sweet fellowship which Christ creates among them and have experienced the manifold blessings it brings, the thought of losing that fellowship is such a dreaded condition that they strive to preserve it at all costs. Still, it sometimes happens that believers are lured

away from fellowship and become entangled again in the defilements of the world (cf. 2Pet. 2:20–22). Solomon said that even if a righteous man falls seven times, he will not stay down (Prov. 24:16a). He loves the family of God too much to stay in sin and be a stumbling-block to others (1Jn. 2:10).

One of the severest forms of chastisement is sickness, or premature death. Some saints in Corinth were severely chastened with sickness and death because they had failed to acknowledge God's order. Of them, Paul wrote,

1Corinthians 11

30. Because of this [not discerning the Lord's body], many are feeble and sick among you, and quite a few have fallen asleep.

31. If we would judge [correct] ourselves, we would not be judged [by the Lord],

32. but when we are judged [by sickness or death], we are being chastened by the Lord so that we might not be condemned along with the world.

In such cases, the chastisement is the entire punishment, for it is intended to save the souls being chastened. In spite of the severity of the chastisement, they will be saved in the end, according to Paul, for he said that the misguided souls in Corinth were being chastened so that they "might not be condemned along with the world."

Years ago, I went to see a sweet older saint who was being chastened with premature death. She was but 57 years old, but cancer had spread throughout her body, and she knew that her time was short. When I entered her hospital room, she wanted me to read the scripture that Jesus had given to her that morning, a scripture which comforted her greatly. It was the confession of an Old Testament servant of God who knew what it meant to be severely chastened: "The LORD has chastened me sore, but He has not given me over to death" (Ps. 118:18). We said nothing about it, but she and I both knew that she was dying because she had stubbornly resisted for years the Lord's call for her to repent. I think she also felt, because of the comforting scripture the Lord gave her, that she was still loved by the Lord and that her physical death would be her entire punishment. She would be spared from suffering the Second Death, damnation in the Lake of Fire (Rev. 20:14; 21:8).

Another of the severest forms of chastisement is to be put out, temporarily, from the Assembly of believers. To be put out from the safety of the Assembly of God is to be turned over to Satan, and Paul exercised that authority on at least two occasions. He turned over to Satan a couple of ministers who were subverting the faith of God's children with false teaching (1Tim. 1:20), and he also turned the immoral young man in Corinth over to Satan (1Cor. 5:5). As horrible as that sounds, in both cases, there was still hope. Concerning the two ministers, Paul said that his purpose for turning them over to Satan was that "they may be taught not to blaspheme." Based on that, it was still possible for them to learn, and if so, they could see their error and repent, and then be received again into the Assembly. And if in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians he was referring to the immoral young man whom Paul turned over to Satan, then the young man had learned his lesson and repented, for Paul was exhorting the saints in Corinth to welcome him back into the Assembly:

1Corinthians 2

6. Sufficient to such a man is this punishment, inflicted by most of you,

7. so that you ought rather to forgive and comfort him, lest such a man be swallowed up by excessive sorrow.

8. So now, I urge you to reaffirm your love for him.

Judgment among the Saints: Punishment

In the most extreme cases, when rebellious believers have repeatedly rejected God's call to repent, Solomon's observation applies: "He who being often reprov'd stiffens his neck will suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy" (Prov. 29:1). God can be so provoked that He no longer offers forgiveness. Concerning the transgression which is "without remedy", the apostle John wrote,

1John 5

16. If anyone sees his brother committing a sin that does not call for death, he shall ask [God to forgive him], and He will give him life for those who commit sins that do not call for death. There is a sin that calls for death; I do not say that he should pray for that.

It is the worst of judgments in this life to be expelled permanently from God's Assembly and continue to live. To suffer that punishment is to be condemned to live out one's life in a state of sin, apart from the body of Christ, and it is greatly to be feared.¹ It is not considered chastisement because it has no healing purpose; it is simply punishment, and it is reserved for the most self-willed and arrogant transgressors. The author of Hebrews gives us this description:

Hebrews 6

4. It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift and made partakers of the holy Spirit,
5. and have tasted of both the good word of God and the powers of the age to come,
6. but then have fallen away, to renew them again to repentance, seeing they are re-crucifying the Son of God in themselves and exposing him to public shame.

And in another place, he added this:

Hebrews 10

28. Anyone [among God's Old Testament people] who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy, by two or three witnesses.
29. Of how much worse punishment, do you think, will he be worthy [in this covenant] who has trampled under foot the Son of God, has regarded as a common thing the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has done outrage to the Spirit of grace?

.....

30. For we know Him who said, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the LORD." And again, "The LORD will judge His people."
31. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Jesus mentioned but one sin that is always unforgivable (Mk. 3:38–39); however, any sin has the potential to be unforgivable, depending on the circumstances (e.g., Isa. 22:12–14). Even under the law, no forgiveness was granted for any sin that was knowingly and willfully committed:

Numbers 15

30. The soul who acts defiantly, whether native-born or a sojourner, he is blaspheming Jehovah, and that soul shall be cut off from among his people.

¹ This condition is to be "tartarized", and it is explained in chapter three of my book, *What the Bible Really Says about Hell*, available for reading or download at GoingtoJesus.com.

31. Because he has despised the word of the LORD and broken His commandment, that soul shall surely be cut off; his iniquity shall be upon him.

The Goodness of Fear

Just knowing that severe judgments are possible instills in believers a healthy fear of the Father. Paul said that “the terror of the Lord” motivated him to fulfill his office and warn men of the coming wrath (2Cor. 5:11). He knew as well that only in humbling himself to obey the gospel that he preached would he himself be saved: “I discipline my body and make it obey, lest after I have preached to others, I myself be rejected” (1Cor. 9:27).

The fear of God keeps us clean (cf. Ps. 19:9); it motivates us to obey God (1Sam. 11:7), to hate evil (Prov. 8:13), and to receive God’s wisdom and knowledge (Job 28:28; Prov. 1:7; 9:10). People who have no fear of living without fellowship with God and His saints are wicked (Ps. 36:1), and it is that lack of fear which makes them so. Satan had no fear of God before he was cast out of heaven because he thought that God was like him, and many among God’s people have made that same fatal mistake (cf. Ps. 50:21). Eventually, like Satan, they will all be cast out forever from the presence of God.

It is true that the love of God casts out fear (1Jn. 4:18), but the fear which God’s love casts out is the fear of everything except God. Jesus himself feared God (Heb. 5:7), and he sternly warned his disciples to do the same (Mt. 10:29; Lk. 12:5). The concomitant to that is that the fear of God creates a healthy fear of those whom He sends. God’s warning, “Do not touch my anointed ones, and do not harm my prophets” (Ps. 105:15) is superfluous to those who fear God; they already know better than to do that.