

JUDGMENT: SOME OBSERVATIONS

INTRODUCTION

1. God is the Protector of His Law.
2. God is not a capricious power who plays dice with the world.
3. He is a faithful God who sticks to His orders and promises, and who, in turn, wants us to do likewise.
 - a. Psalm 1:2. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night.

I. DEATH - RESURRECTION BRING US TO FINALITY.

- A. Psalm 90:10. The days of our lives are seventy years; and if by reason of strength they are eighty years, yet their boast is only labor and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.
 1. Death gives each moment of our life its singularity; we cannot repeat one act of our life. Unceasingly and unresistingly we are on our way to the eschaton. Whether we want it or not, whether we realize it or not, we exist truly eschatologically, since the potential presence of the eschaton at any moment of our life gives our life its peculiarity. Even love has to be seen under this aspect of death, since love is essentially giving away part of oneself to another person or persons. This means that we irretrievably give away part of our life and die a little more each time we extend our love. Thus love is sacrifice of our life. But it would be totally wrong to understand this kind of voluntary sacrifice as a heroic deed. Giving away life is only possible because we receive it in the first place.
 2. Mark 8:35. "For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it."
 3. Death does not just show us the dimensional difference between God and ourselves and our dependence on God's life-giving power. Death also discloses God's opposition to us sinful people. We encounter death not only as the inescapable end of our life but as God's "no" to the way we conduct our life, to our continuous sinful alienation from God. The singularity of every moment of our life is finalized in death, and our total life with all its omissions, failures, and commissions becomes irreversible. In death we are immediately confronted with God, who holds us responsible for our actions and makes us accountable for our doings. Death also shows us that our life is not of eternal value. God regards the way we live our life here on earth as unworthy to be preserved, and he rejects its anti-Godly character.

It would be shortsighted to conclude that biological death can be inferred from sin and fall, as if there had been a time when death did not prevail. But Western theologians from Augustine onward taught that humanity had once been in an integer or original state, where it had the possibility of not sinning and consequently of not dying. Death, sorrow, and pain came into the world through human sinfulness. Only those outside the confines of orthodox faith dared to assert that the first human couple would have died whether they had sinned or not. Fortunately, most contemporary theologians refrain from speculations about a pre-mortal original state of humanity.

4. The idea of a pre-mortal state would bring us into deep conflict with the clear findings of paleontology which shows that biological death already prevailed for millions of years before humanity emerged. Furthermore, we would miss the essential task of theology, which is not to indulge in vague metaphysical speculations founded on a narrow biblical basis, but to interpret our present reality by relating it to God's will, a will to which our present situation witnesses. Thus when Paul stated that "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23), or that "sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned" (Rom. 5:12), he did not merely intend to talk about a single individual who lived long ago and whose sinful action had cosmic significance. He wanted to talk about the emergence of the age of death (not just in a biological way). This age has its head in Adam, who is the antitype to Christ, the head of the age of life, the new aeon. Unlike animals, we no longer experience the fear of a merely biological death. Knowing about our sinfulness, our alienation from God, and our shortcomings, we encounter death as the final irreversible termination in which these distortions of life can no longer be patched up or concealed. Fear of death becomes fear of judgment, fear of this final inescapable confrontation which the God who is not only our creator but also our judge.

B. Our destiny lies with coming face to face with Christ.

1. I Thess. 4:15-16. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.
2. Acts 10:42. "And he commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead."
3. John 5:22. "For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son,"

4. Face to Face - What will it be?

O that will be glory for me
Glory for me, glory for me
When by His grace I will look on His face,
That will be glory, be glory for me.

- a. Matt. 24:29-30. "Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory."
- b. II Pet. 3:10. But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up."
- c. The final judgment is a difficult subject to mention because everybody wants to be saved but only a few are willing to accept judgment as its prerequisite. H. Richard Niebuhr's famous phrase about 19th century American liberalism: "*A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross,*" is a vivid description of humanity in general. We desire heaven, but we do not want to accept that the only way to heaven is through judgment. But the New Testament in all its witnesses makes it unmistakably clear that the only way to the new world to come is through judgment, and that the consummation of the world does not mean final evolution but implies the parousia of the Lord and the final judgment.
- d. "For the son of Man is to come with His angels in the glory of His Father, and then He will repay every man for what he has done" (Matt. 16:27).

"When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. Before Him will be gathered all nations, and He will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats" (Matt. 25:31f.).

"For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God" (1 Thess. 4:16).

"We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body" (2 Cor. 5:10).

"And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, by what they had done" (Rev. 20:12).

The imagery of these quotes from the New Testament, which could easily be multiplied, betrays Old Testament and Jewish apocalyptic influences. The language is that of a past age and need not necessarily be reiterated, but the tendency of these passages is crystal clear: there is a final judgment.

- e. Often this final judgment has been conceived as the great awards day. This is especially evident in the chiliastic hopes of a 1000-year rule over and at the expense of others. Yet, the final judgment is not a judgment of our own merits, but of our response to God's grace which he has extended to us in Jesus Christ. We are not awarded a certificate of loyalty simply because we happened to be on the right side at the right time. Such cheap grace would neglect our wrongdoings. Voltaire was not right when he mocked: "God will forgive, because it is his job."

C. Since Christ is Judge - Christians Take Heart.

1. Since Christ the Savior is also the judge, the judgment in all its seriousness has a comforting aspect. By confronting us with Himself and His gospel, Christ has shown us the direction of our life, and through His dying and resurrection, He has enabled us to pursue this direction of our life, to live in conformity and toward conformity with God. The first Christian community, who preserved for us all the dreadful apocalyptic imagery of the final judgment, was not scared by the prospect of this judgment. It knew that it was the necessary "entrance gate" to the new world to come. Thus marana tha ("Our Lord, come!") was a familiar word in the first Christian community (cf. 1 Cor. 16:22), and the book of Revelation closes in a similar way with "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev. 20:20). Martin Luther recaptured this New Testament confidence in the face of the judgment when, contrary to the mood of the Middle Ages, he did not conceive of this day as a day of wrath, but as a day of the glory of God, a day he was looking forward to when he said in many of his letters: "Come, dear, last day."
2. But is not such an ultimate, universal judgment day as obsolete as the apocalyptic imagery in which its coming is expressed? Are we not finally indulging in a travelogue eschatology? Our answer must be no, because human destiny aims at participation in God's eternity. If we were to realize this determination, then we would live at each moment in accordance with the eternity of God at which we are aiming. But we are self-centered, and instead of

living each moment in the light of eternity, we live mainly in the light of ourselves or of transitoriness. When we die, we are unable to continue our self-centered life; our temporal life ceases and only the eternity of God is left, into which we are received. Thus death becomes the boundary line that we cross as we enter into the eternity of God.

3. Death also finalizes and completes our participation in the eternity of God. Our earthly life, which is only known to us partially as long as we live it, will become known in totality. Nevertheless, it will become known in totality not for itself but in confrontation with the "blueprint" of its eternal destination. Then its fragmentariness will become visible and irreversible, and the discrepancy between the possibility and the actuality of our earthly life will be what we experience as God's final judgment, a judgment which, in anticipation, we have already long ago pronounced upon ourselves in our earthly life. Only those who are already in this life connected with eternity in time, with Jesus Christ, have the assurance that this discrepancy will be overcome, because Jesus Christ, though human, never allowed this discrepancy to develop in his life, in his death, and beyond death. Consequently, through alignment with him, death will result in resurrection not only to judgment, but to eternal life.
4. Paradox between justice and love of God -

The option for a universal homecoming becomes at no time more urgent than when we are confronted with the final judgment and realize that not everybody will be saved. But Jesus, and with Him the New Testament witnesses, are convinced of a twofold outcome of this final judgment. "The gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few" (Matt. 7:13f.), we hear Jesus say. And we read the same in the Gospel of John, only actualized in the now: "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; he who does not obey the Son, shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests upon him" (John 3:36). And the book of Revelation expresses in typical apocalyptic fashion: "And the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever; and they have no rest, day or night" (Rev. 14:11).

To make the issue more confusing, the New Testament also contains many assertions that God wants all people to be saved. Paul, for instance, in wrestling with the destiny of Israel, expresses the conviction that "God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all" (Rom. 11:32). The goal of the cosmos and of all saving history is universal salvation, a goal which embraces the destiny of all individuals, Jews, and pagans alike. In a similar way, to quote just one more reference, we hear that God our Savior "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowl-

edge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). All this boils down to a final paradox that states on the one hand that God's love wants all to be saved and declares on the other hand that God's justice requires all the disobedient to be punished.

5. God knows us completely.

- a. Heb. 4:11-13. Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience. For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.
- b. In a dialogue with an agnostic Jew, held in the presence of persons who were contemplating Christianity, I asked him what he looked for in Christians. He was well acquainted with all the relevant Christians, the born-again Christians, and the secular Christians. But he said: "I wish they would try to speak of and live with their own great teachings. If I could believe these, I would. Since they claim to, I would like to see how different the world would look if incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection were taken seriously." And what a difference it would make.

II. MANY WILL BE WEIGHED IN THE BALANCE - AND BE FOUND WANTING.

A. From Adam to the end - all will stand there.

1. "Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his (the Son of Man's) voice and come out - those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned." (John 5:28-29).
2. Listen to W. Graham Scroggie:

"The revelation of a Judgment Seat for believers is a further evidence that the fullness of heaven is not entered upon and enjoyed by any until after the advent and the resurrection. Christians who throughout these nineteen hundred years have passed on, have not yet been judged as to their faithfulness or unfaithfulness. That does not take place when we die, but will do so on the eve of the consummation of redemption, of that state which will be perfect, serviceable and eternal."
3. Listen to Daniel Webster:

"So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God" (Rom. 14:12). Few verses of Scripture are more soul-searching than this. Daniel Webster,

the noted American statesman, on being asked what was the greatest thought he had ever entertained, replied, "The greatest thought that has ever entered my mind is that one day I will have to stand before a holy God and give an account of my life."

B. Some never entered the race.

1. II Tim. 4:14. Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm. May the Lord repay his according to his works.
2. I Cor. 4:5. Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the heart. Then each one's praise will come from God.

C. Some fell out of the race.

1. I Tim. 1:18-20. This charge I commit to you, son Timothy, according to the prophecies previously made concerning you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, having faith and a good conscience, which some having rejected, concerning the faith have suffered shipwreck, of whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I delivered to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.
2. II Tim. 4:10. For Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world, and has departed for Thessalonica - Crescens for Galatia, Titus for Dalmatia.

D. Some will finish the race.

1. II Tim. 4:7-8. I have fought a good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.
2. Heb. 12:1-2. Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.
3. I Cor. 9:24-27. Do you know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.

4. I John 2:28. And now, little children, abide in Him, that when He appears, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming.

CONCLUSION:

1. At the judgment some will be consigned to Hell.
2. Some will inherit Heaven.
3. We make the choices every day -
 For Heaven
 For Hell

"C H O O S E L I F E A N D L I V E"