

Is “Judgment” a Bad Word?

By Nathan Warner

“Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.”
(Acts 17:30-31, NASB)

“Let the field exult, and all that is in it. Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy before the LORD, for He is coming, for He is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in His faithfulness.” (Psalm 96:12-13)

Did you read that? Even the fields and the trees will sing for joy at Christ’s return to judge the world! God’s judgment is supposed to be a joyful thing! Why then is the idea of Judgment often seen as an unpleasant thing among Christians? There are many who don’t think we should talk about God’s judgment because they think it scares people and turns them off the Gospel. “God is love,” they say, “and He is forgiving.” This is true, but He also created Hell for His judgment of un-believers. How do we reconcile God as loving with His judgment that sends people to Hell?

What is God’s Judgment Anyway?

Before we get started, let’s define what God’s judgment is. Simply put, God’s judgment of the world will begin when Jesus returns to *“execute judgment upon all, and to convict all the ungodly of all their ungodly deeds which they have done in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him”* (Jude 1:15), *“and we know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things”* (Romans 2:2), for *“the Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”* (Matthew 13:41-42). *“Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment”* (John 5:28-29).

God’s Judgment Bothers Some Believers

Sometimes Believers struggle with the idea of God’s judgment. Perhaps they stumble with sin and are afraid of God’s wrath, not understanding that they should have no fear of judgment if they do not live in sin willfully and if they confess their sins to Him, maturing through God’s process of Sanctification: *“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”* (1 John 1:9).

On the other hand, perhaps they struggle with God’s judgment because their experiences with human judgment (through their parents, for example) may have seemed unexpected, arbitrary, or capricious, and they project these fears on God, worrying that His judgment may also be unpredictable.

Or perhaps they struggle with God's judgment because their life-experiences can make God's nature seem arbitrary and whimsical. It can be kind of difficult to look forward to an irreversible act of God that damns millions to eternal suffering and torment when you struggle with how arbitrary and unpredictable you feel God's actions or inactions are in your life.

The Modern Church Has a Problem with God's Judgment

Regardless of the reason, not many Christians feel "exultant" when they think about the judgment of God. It's one of the last things anyone wants to talk about – the elephant in the room that Believers may feel awkward about when entertaining guests or talking to their non-believing friends. Many pastors and teachers think Hell threatens the "marketability" of the Gospel. It makes Christianity hard to compete in the world "market" of ideas. They say things like, "If we avoided all the 'ugly' and 'scary' parts of the Gospel, so many more people would come to know Christ! We need to focus on God's love and forgiveness and just do away with all this fire and brimstone talk – it just doesn't sell!"

This has caused the Church to de-emphasize God's judgment of the sinful world in favor of God's love. After all, everyone likes to hear they are loved, right? While God's love for sinful man and His forgiveness of our sin through repentance and coming to know Christ is the beautiful promise of the Gospel, that doesn't lessen the reality of God's judgment upon the wicked and unrepentant people in the world. Aside from ungodly motives (raising money, increasing church attendance, and elevating our popularity), why might we have issues with God's judgment?

Is God's Judgment Like Man's Justice?

Our experience with human judgment shows that many things can push and pull it in unexpected and unrighteous directions. We see many miscarriages of justice, bureaucratic paper shuffles, and arbitrary decisions. Sometimes this happens by accident; after all, men cannot see into the motives and the heart and so make mistakes in their judgment. Sometimes it happens by design.

Many times in life, we are taken advantage of by powerful people who said they were there to help us, and we trusted them, but our trust was betrayed, for *"the law is ignored And justice is never upheld. For the wicked surround the righteous; Therefore justice comes out perverted"* (Habakkuk 1:4). People make us good promises, but their final actions aren't always faithful to us. Even then, we may not be able to discern their hearts, because they always have a "good" reason for their actions.

Even if we believe God's justice is different from man's justice, we may still struggle at times with anxiety that it too will be unpredictable and fickle. Thus, the thought of God's judgment coming upon people isn't always a "joyful" thought because our understanding has been skewed by our experience of the world's judgment. Will God also be arbitrary?

Is the End Going to Be as Traumatic as My Life Has Been?

Sometimes stuff happens in our lives that can make us fear God. Look at Job's words: *"Behold, I cry, 'Violence!' but I get no answer; I shout for help, but there is no justice"* (Job 19:7). *"Have I not wept for the one whose life is hard? Was not my soul grieved for the needy?"*

When I expected good, then evil came; when I waited for light, then darkness came. I am seething within and cannot relax; Days of affliction confront me. I go about mourning without comfort” (Job 30:25-28a). In other words, “Haven’t I obeyed Your Word? Haven’t I followed Your ways? Why have You not protected me?” Job called upon the name of the Lord every day, but instead of help, his life was being burned from the top down, and it seemed to him like God stood by and watched the injustice of it all like a spectator. It’s hard to trust God when you expected help, but instead you were hurt—how can you trust that the judgment of God will not also be like this?

Have you ever felt this way? Maybe He didn’t protect you from an injury or an illness when you felt like you had given your life into His protection (think of Paul with the thorn in his flesh). Maybe you lost everything that you felt you had entrusted to Him for safe-keeping (think of Job). Is God unfaithful?

But What is Our Real Issue with God’s Judgment?

Behind any apprehension we have with God’s judgment is the truth that we actually have apprehension with God Himself. At the core of the issue, we don’t trust His nature and we don’t have faith in His character. If we did, we would have faith in His judgment because we know it is part of His character, a character that He spelled out for us in His Word, a character that is loving, kind, holy, and pure. The Scriptures tell us that God is Just, God is Love, God is Holy: *“As for God, His way is blameless; the word of the LORD is tried; He is a shield to all who take refuge in Him”* (Psalm 18:30). *“For the Lord is a God of justice; How blessed are all those who long for Him”* (Isaiah 30:18b).

The problem with internalizing these truths is that satan often twists our experience of human judgment, just as he also twists the heartbreaking, traumatic, and horrific experiences we go through in life to try and reflect a different nature in God. He wants us to join in on accusing God of being unfaithful and untrustworthy. The difficulties of life sometimes lead us to question God’s nature: “How can God, Who says He loves me, allow me to be hurt so badly? Is He Who He says He is?”

God Says, “I AM WHO I AM”

The real question we must answer is, “Do I know God?” When people can’t reconcile Who God says He is with what God does or what God says He will do, they are faced with a decision: trust Him or don’t trust Him. God has said, “I AM WHO I AM” (Exodus 3:14) – either you believe Him or you don’t, for He has made it clear in His Word what His nature is. There is no middle ground for us to feel wishy-washy about Him in the waves of life.

The whole issue comes down to your personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Do you love Him? Do you trust Him? Or do you harbor anger, bitterness, and fear? We need to come to terms with this before we can correctly approach the topic of God’s Judgment of the world. Because if we don’t trust His nature, we will always be afraid His Judgment may be unfair, arbitrary, or harsh.

Unfortunately, at this juncture, many turn to false doctrines. Instead of believing God’s Word, they invent fictions to reconcile their understanding of Who God is with how they think things should be (everyone goes to Heaven, Hell is temporary, Hell doesn’t exist, etc). But in doing this, they are actually judging God’s Word unfaithful and slandering His character, not

heeding the Scriptures, which say, *“Every word of God proves true; He is a shield to those who take refuge in Him. Do not add to His words, lest He rebuke you and you be found a liar”* (Proverbs 30:5-6, ESV).

No One Accidentally Goes to Hell

If we trust God is Who He says He is, then we know His creation of Hell is not harsh or cruel. If you believe God, you know that the verdict men receive before Him on Judgment Day will not be a mistake. There will be no miscarriage of justice, no bureaucratic paper shuffling, no arbitrary categories penciled in, and no hung juries. When men receive eternal damnation from God, they will actually, truly deserve it, without any room for forgiveness in their lives, because there is no room for repentance in their hearts, for Jesus said, *“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”* (John 5:24). It is an unfortunate thing that some Believers feel people are going to Hell almost accidentally, as if God’s witness in their life failed them. Many Believers harbor guilt because they don’t feel they are “doing enough” to witness or evangelize. They believe that they literally have blood on their hands because God expects them to get the message of salvation to people or they will go to Hell. While we should always be encouraging one another in the Great Commission to witness and evangelize (Matthew 28:16-20), the truth is that no one is going to Hell because of what we do or don’t do. There will be no scene in Heaven where God says, “Well, Frank, if it was up to me, I’d have saved you, but Tim over there was the witness I had in your life, and he wasn’t bold enough to knock on your door, so now I have to send you to Hell.” This kind of thinking is an assault on the sovereign nature of God.

God is faithful and just to reach with His saving hand to any heart that can be persuaded to trust Him. He abandons no one who can be saved. It is not in His nature: *“For the eyes of the Lord move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His”* (2 Chronicles 16:9b, NASB). *“Good and upright is the LORD; Therefore He instructs sinners in the way. He leads the humble in justice, and He teaches the humble His way. All the paths of the LORD are lovingkindness and truth to those who keep His covenant and His testimonies”* (Psalm 25:8-10), while *“the Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance”* (2 Peter 3:9). David declared, *“My shield is with God, Who saves the upright in heart. God is a righteous judge, and a God who feels indignation every day. If a man does not repent, God will whet His sword; He has bent and readied His bow; He has prepared for him His deadly weapons, making His arrows fiery shafts. Behold, the wicked man conceives evil and is pregnant with mischief and gives birth to lies. He makes a pit, digging it out, and falls into the hole that he has made. His mischief returns upon his own head, and on his own skull his violence descends”* (Psalm 7:10-16, ESV).

Those who go to Hell will have been given a very real opportunity to repent from their wicked ways—no one will be able to claim God is guilty of an oversight, accident, miscarriage, or whim, and if they are sentenced to eternal damnation, it will truly be justice from a loving, merciful, faithful, and righteous God, as Paul explained to the Christians in Rome: *“The God who inflicts wrath is not unrighteous, is He? (I am speaking in human terms.) May it never be! For otherwise, how will God judge the world?”* (Romans 3:5b-6, NASB).

God Judges the Very Heart of Man

God is not unrighteous in His wrath, not even by accident. God sees the heart that accepts Him, just as He knows the heart that rejects Him? Scripture says, *“The word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart”* (Hebrews 4:12). God is not blind. He sees every facet of our being. Just as there is no “righteous” mask that can fool Him into thinking someone evil is good, no “filthy” garb can mislead Him into thinking the humble are wicked. God is not tricked, as David warned his son, Solomon: *“If you say, ‘See, we did not know this,’ does He not consider it who weighs the hearts? And does He not know it who keeps your soul? And will He not render to man according to his work?”* (Proverbs 24:12)

God sees everything and weighs the hearts of men, and He will *“render to each according to all his ways, whose heart You know for You alone know the hearts of the sons of men”* (2 Chronicles 6:30b). God will not judge mankind by the letter of His Law but by the Spirit of His Law. Salvation is a matter of the heart, and everyone who goes to Hell will have gone there because there was no room for Jesus to rule in their hearts; *“therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men’s hearts; and then each man’s praise will come to him from God”* (1 Corinthians 4:5).

Let Us Rejoice in God’s Judgment!

God’s judgment is a good thing, because HE IS GOOD. God is faithful to the upright in heart for His judgment will fall upon the wicked only. The wickedness of the world should grieve our hearts, just as the hardness of men’s hearts grieves God because it prevents them from repenting of their evil. We must witness Christ to the world, wishing that none should perish, just like our Heavenly Father. But, just as the trees, fields, and everything in them exult at God’s judgment, we also should sing for joy over Christ’s coming judgment of the world. For we are not God’s salvation to mankind, Jesus is—He alone will judge the whole entire earth in righteousness, because only He knows the true nature of men’s hearts.

In light of this, *“trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He will make your paths straight”* (Proverbs 3:5-6). May we trust His judgment! Even so, Amen.