

Part 2: Biblical Themes in the Old Testament  
G. Rebellion Against the Divine Order  
21. The Righteous Judgment of God

We've been focusing lately on "Rebellion against the Divine Order," dealing in turn with (1) sin and its consequences and (2) spiritual warfare. Now we move to a third topic in this sequence: "The Righteous Judgment of God." Let's first consider the word "judgment."

Judgment (or good judgment) is defined as the ability to make considered decisions or come to sensible conclusions. It's something that everyone needs in life.

- Roads are safe to travel on only insofar as drivers make good judgments about such things as road conditions and their own abilities and limitations.
- The success of businesses depends considerably on employers and employees making good judgments in the exercise of their responsibilities at work.
- Parents and teachers work hard to help their children and students grow in discernment and in the self-control necessary to put that discernment into practice in their own lives.
- And, of course, societies cannot function well without the good judgment of their public officials and especially the "judges" they appoint to render fair and impartial judgments about guilt and innocence, and deserved, even if sometimes severe, penalties and punishments.

Everyone likes good judgment. Still, the concept of judgment conjures up negative images in the minds of many people. That's probably because they equate it with judgmentalism, in which people stick their noses into what doesn't concern them, and/or self-righteously condemn others for the same behaviors they excuse in themselves. Judgmental may also be used to label those who judge with unnecessary harshness.

It is this last variety of judgmentalism that poses a problem for many readers of Scripture who think that God is unnecessarily harsh in his judgments. No doubt some of those who make such a claim do so in order to justify their rejection of God and his requirements. But many Christians also are bothered by the extent and violence of various divine judgments in the Old Testament, and also by what both the Old and New Testaments say about the Final Judgment and Hell. They wonder, "How can a loving God send people to an eternal hell?"

"He can't," said Marcion of Sinope, one of the leaders of the Christian church in the second century. "At least the God of the New Testament can't." Marcion believed that two different gods were revealed in the Bible. The God of the Jews—depicted in the Old Testament—he saw to be an arbitrary, legalistic, punitive, and jealous deity, who had no connection whatsoever with Jesus or his message.

On the other hand Marcion saw the God of the New Testament—represented by Jesus, who worked to redeem humanity—to be merciful and compassionate. Marcion, therefore, rejected the entire Old Testament as well as those New Testament books that transmitted the ideas of the Old Testament. His Bible consisted of parts of the Gospel of Luke and the ten letters of Paul, but with offending passages removed—anything that seemed to be of Jewish origin, including the concept of a final judgment.

Marcion was eventually convicted of heresy and excommunicated from the church. However, his ideas live on in part in those who, reading the uncomfortable accounts of judgment in Scripture, think, "God is not like that anymore."

But that notion doesn't do justice to Scripture, which consistently presents only one God at work throughout the entirety of the redemptive-historical story. Consequently, we need to understand how God's judgments fit together with his mercy and compassion.

For the moment, let's assume that God is kind and loving. That will actually be the focus of the next lecture, but it's not a stretch to assume that the one who created everything has an interest in being kind and loving to the works of his hands. And we should assume, moreover, that the almighty Creator is in a better position than his creatures are to be fair in his judging and to say what judgments are necessary.

Clearly, God believes that his judgments are necessary in order to advance the plans he has for his entire creation. In fact, his willingness to deal with and judge what's wrong illustrates the strength of his commitment to his original plans for his creation and for us, whom he has made in his image and given supremacy and dominion over God's other creatures and the earth itself (cf. Gen 1:28). I contend that every judgment of God is a mercy (sometimes a severe mercy) designed to counteract the sin and rebellion that distance humanity from him, and to reestablish at least a remnant into the privilege of his presence and help. After all, apart from a good connection with our Creator there no life, let alone ability to fulfill our potential.

Let's look at the lengths to which God went to help his image-bearers in what is perhaps the most famous of his judgments to date: Noah's Flood. In the centuries after Paradise was lost, two different lines of people populated the earth—the line of Cain and the line of Seth. Cain's descendants were by and large corrupt; like Cain they resented God and lived as if his provisions and demands were a burden rather than a blessing. But Seth's line was schooled in the wholehearted service of their Creator. There came a time, however, when even most of the descendants of Seth had gone over to the other side. Gen. 6:11-12 tells us that with the exception of Noah, *The earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence. God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways.*

The whole earth was full of wickedness. People acted as though God wasn't even there. They dreamed up all sorts of evil things to do to each other and the world that God had created, making God both sad and angry at the rebellion of his image-bearers. This wasn't what he had intended and planned for them. God had made it possible for human hearts to be always and only inclined to serve their Maker. But now all of God's good intentions were being opposed at every step and by almost every person.

It's clear that God hated this wickedness (i.e. rebellion against himself), and He did not take it lightly to have his intentions disregarded—an attitude to which he had every right since he created the world and its inhabitants. To be specific, there is not and never has been any blade of grass, or any animal or person which has not owed its existence to the Creator. There is not and never has been any talent, or skill, or any human creative thought or action that has been gotten independently of God's provision.

And so God never has to answer to anyone but himself for what he does with his world. He has the say-so, the right to govern it as he chooses. Nor will he ever yield his will to the desires of those who rebel against him. People often change their minds, especially in the face of opposition. God never does. He always remains committed to his perfect plans and intentions. So God decided to destroy his world with a great flood and start over. He who brought order from chaos, could just as easily turn order back into chaos and start over.

But God's mercy was also revealed in the midst of judgment. For God came to Noah, whom Scripture identifies as one who walked faithfully with God (as every person has been created to do). God took the initiative to come to Noah to instruct him how he and his family and representative creatures of his world might escape the coming judgment.

What's more, he gave Noah's contemporaries the opportunity to escape his judgment. As grieved as God was by Noah's generation, he graciously postponed judgment for a time while Noah, whom the apostle Peter later called a preacher of righteousness (2 Peter 2:5), shared his faith and God's message with his world. But, as it turned out, Noah's preaching was to no avail. Any who did listen, ridiculed him. The means of salvation, preaching of righteousness, and God's patience were there, yet everyone refused and ultimately received their judgment.

God's righteous judgments always end in disaster for those who persist in wickedness. However, his judgments never bring only death and destruction; for those who trust and honor God, as Noah did and urged others to do, they preserve life. In this and every other judgment of God there is always more happening than the violence and destruction of judgment; there is also the corresponding opportunity for the enhancement of the life and health of those committed to live as God has intended us to live. Judgment for the wicked always means that the repentant will have greater opportunities to experience the blessings of God.

For those on the ark, the flood waters of judgment became waters of salvation, and eventually a fresh start for God's world. People were again put in touch with the original purpose of humanity. To emphasize this, God even gave the survivors instructions similar to those he'd used with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. *"Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth."*

Unfortunately, it didn't take long for things to go awry in the restart. Even Noah and his family messed up badly. And through the succeeding generations things became worse. I'll just mention some of the better known judgments of God that followed in the next centuries.

- God's judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah, whom God would have spared for the sake of only ten righteous,
- God's judgments on Egypt, carried out in the process of delivering his people from slavery,
- God's judgments on the Canaanites, carried out in the process of fulfilling his promise of a homeland—a new paradise—where God's people could live and prosper under his protection,
- God's judgment on his own people, in which he allowed them to be killed or taken into captivity by the Assyrians and Babylonians, because they ignored or rejected the rule of God over them.
- There are many more examples in Scripture of God's judgments, in which his punishments upon the wicked served not only as the righteous reward for their sin, but also as an incentive for the witnesses to examine their own lives and turn from their own wicked ways so that they might avoid the same fate.

In fact, in all the judgment stories, escape from judgment had been possible if the sinners had only stopped their rebellion against God and done what they knew to be right.

- But Sodom's residents persisted in their wicked behavior and even the men who were pledged to become Lot's sons-in-law refused his pleas to leave the city.
- Pharaoh ignored the counsel, not only of Moses, but also his own court, and persisted in hardhearted rebellion against the Lord, rendering the whole of his country liable to God's judgment. But some of his citizens were undoubtedly part of the mixed multitude (Ex. 12:38) that joined the Israelites on their departure from Egypt.

- The Canaanites saw what the Lord had done on behalf of his people in delivering them from Pharaoh and during their subsequent years of wandering in the wilderness. Rahab spoke of their fear of the Israelites and their God. But only Rahab and her family did what Caleb's family had done years before: converted to become part of God's people.
- And with regard to God's judgment of his people as shown in their exile from the Promised Land, those who remained faithful suffered along with the nation. Still, God would reestablish them in the land, for this was not yet his final judgment.

It is thus important for us to take every judgment of God as an invitation to repentance and an incentive to become the worshipers and servants of God that every person was created and equipped to be. These judgments are instructive moreover, to show us what the final outcome will be for those who refuse to repent but persist in rebellion. Jesus was clear about the present opportunities people had to escape God's judgment. But he also spoke of a coming final judgment from which there would be no escape—what Zephaniah and other Old Testament prophets called "The Day of the Lord." (See, for example, Zephaniah 1:12-18.)

There were many people in Zephaniah's day who thought they had plenty of time to right what was wrong. They were complacent about their faith and life; and also complacent also about God, supposing that he just smiled on everybody and thinking he would do nothing, either good or bad. Maybe they thought God was not powerful enough to do anything; maybe they thought he lacked the will to do anything, let alone judge anyone. Either way, by their reckoning, God had not shown his hand for so long; evidently they didn't see him at work in the catastrophes and violence of their day.

As a result they felt no need to depend upon God and had a false sense of security about their future. In essence, they were unbelievers. I'm sure that not all of them utterly corrupt and haters of God. I'm sure that some professed to be believers in name, but they didn't take seriously God's instructions about how to live. But what it all came down to was unbelief in one form or another.

Zephaniah described why the Day of the Lord should provoke such fear in unbelievers. He spoke of it as "a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, of clouds and blackness." He said that the judged would lose all the things they put their trust in. And even if they could keep them, those repositories of misplaced trust would not be able to save them. Their fate would be inescapable for the day of the Lord would be a day on which the Lord judged sin and no sinner would escape.

Zephaniah also said that the Day of the Lord could come any time, and that it would come as a surprise. He didn't use the same image Jesus later did, but his meaning was the same. It would come suddenly and unexpectedly, like a thief in the night. Zephaniah's words were directed specifically against his own nation of Judah; his prophecy was fulfilled in part when his people were carried away into exile into Babylon and Jerusalem was destroyed, together with the temple of God. But what Zephaniah prophesied had a broader fulfillment too—in another Day of the Lord that would be revealed by the coming Messiah.

In fact, Jesus referred to God's imminent judgment at the beginning of his ministry. He, like John the Baptist before him, proclaimed, "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:14). God's judgment was something to fear, Jesus taught. But the good news of which he spoke was that repentance was still an option.

The prospect of judgment can become, therefore, a means of grace. In fact, Zephaniah's words, and other Scriptural warnings of judgment are meant to be means of grace to everyone who is guilty of neglect of and disobedience to the Sovereign Lord or merely complacency with regard to serving him.

That's because the Lord will come not only to punish the sinners and the complacent, but also, by implication and by outright promise, to protect and preserve those who are neither corrupt nor complacent, those, the gospel message is, who have been forgiven and set on the right path through the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

Repentance was and is an option, however, that becomes closed at a person's death, for then, those whose sins have not been forgiven are irrevocably destined for judgment. But it's an option that will be closed as well for the living on the day that Jesus Christ comes again to consolidate his reign and judge all sinners.

On that ultimate Day of the Lord, despite all of the distinctions that separate people today, there will be only two groups: unforgiven sinners and the forgiven—no longer called sinners but saints—two groups, the unforgiven sinners to be judged, and the saints, who get a pass. And where you stand makes all the difference. The Day of the Lord is the day in which he silences all opposition. That's the day he judges and eliminates all that is evil. That's the day it will be apparent who's in charge; it will be apparent who's the judge; it will be apparent who's saved and who's condemned.

This is heavy stuff, and it must be admitted that all this biblical talk of the Day of the Lord and God's final judgment still sounds rather bleak to many people. But remember the point I made earlier that judgment for the wicked always means that the repentant will have greater opportunities to experience the blessings of God. God's judgment of sin is necessary so that all of God's purposes for humanity can be realized.

On the Day of Judgment everything that Jesus Christ stood for and stands for, everything biblical, will be vindicated. All persecution suffered for the cause of Christ, all shame endured for his sake, all ridicule for Christian principles, will be vindicated. It's a day in which our faith will be confirmed and a day in which the sin that continually plagues us will be wiped away so that those whom God has saved may enter into an eternity of joy.

The God who has forgiven the sins of those who trust in him will look at us and say, "Because of your acceptance and your belief in my Son, your Savior, you may get out of the Judgment Line, and into the line that takes you into the joy of my rest." That's the rest God has had in mind since the beginning, since Eden, and then again after the flood, and then again in his installation of Israel in the Promised Land where they could worship and serve him wholeheartedly. To get there, there must be a final and ultimate judgment of sin and Satan and everyone that opposes Almighty God. That final righteous judgment of God on sin is necessary to usher in his kingdom of lasting joy and peace.