



GOD'S GOOD JUDGMENT

“The Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty...”
(Exodus 34:6-7)

INTRODUCTION

The doctrine of divine judgment is one of the most difficult and uncomfortable for many Christians to deal with. The related topics of hell, wrath, and justice can be extremely difficult and emotional to discuss with believers and non-believers alike. Though we don't want to minimize the exceeding tragedy of any person missing out on an eternity with Jesus in His kingdom, oftentimes if we can clear away some of the cultural debris surrounding these subjects we end up discovering that the Bible's vision for how and why God will execute His judgment and bring His justice to the world is actually very much part of His good news. We'll frame this conversation with a handful of questions that typically swirl around this topic. This is, of course, only a quick introduction into thinking through these issues. The resources listed at the end are there for further study.

QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES

How could we trust the character of a God of judgment? We are told that the incarnation of Jesus was the clearest, fullest revelation of God and His character (Hebrews 1:1-4; John 10:22-39). The same God who came into the world as a servant, a humble champion of the marginalized, a lover of the whole world—*this* God will be the one who ultimately judges the world. He is not malicious or pointlessly vindictive. He is “The Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty...” (Exodus 34:6-7). We can rest assured that His judgment will be in full accord with His righteous character, complete knowledge, and perfect wisdom. *In response, how could we trust anyone else with the responsibility of judgment?*

Isn't a judging God in conflict with a God of love? God's judgment is an expression of His love and goodness to His people and the rest of creation. Motivated by self-giving love, God created the universe and everything in it—including people (Genesis 1-2). Humanity's fall into sin introduced discord into our relationship with God and violence between people and the rest of creation (Genesis 3). Since God loves the people He made, He won't sit idly by while people abuse one another. His judgment, at bottom, is His declaration that sin/violence/abuse is objectively wrong and that He will put an end to it. The rest of the Biblical narrative traces His plan to bring healing, peace, and restoration to humanity and the rest of creation itself, culminating in the final removal of all evil from His good world (Revelation 19-22). God's judgment and wrath are the flipside of His love violated. *In response, how could we call God truly loving if He eternally turned a blind eye to sin, evil, suffering, and death?*

Wouldn't the world be a better place without a judgment? This question is closely related to the previous one. Many people hope for the end of all religion (and with it, judgment), believing that will be what brings peace to the world (John Lennon's song “Imagine” is a powerful example). But if there were no final judge/judgment, there would be no truly objective basis for morality. Only the despair of nihilism would remain. Of course, lots of people without belief in the Christian God have systems of morality, but these systems could never actually be objectively binding for anyone given what they say about the world and people. The Christian God, on the other hand, defines, upholds, and enforces each of these concepts (Psalm 119:160). *In response, how could we make sense of morality, make sense of human dignity, or ascribe any value to life at all without a judging God?*

Doesn't the idea of a judging God always lead its people into violence? If the ultimate judge of the universe is one who has called his people to violently attack particular groups, then yes. But if the ultimate judge of the universe is the Christian God, then the answer is no, since He explicitly calls His people to live peaceably and to leave the final judgment to Him (Romans 12:14-21; James 4:12). Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf powerfully describes the peace-making power of the idea of a judging God: “My thesis that the practice of nonviolence requires a belief in divine vengeance will be unpopular with many Christians, especially theologians in the West. To the person who is inclined to dismiss it, I suggest imagining that you are delivering a lecture in a war zone... Among your listeners are people whose cities and villages have been first plundered, then burned and leveled to the ground, whose daughters and sisters have been raped, whose fathers and brothers have had their throats slit. The topic of the lecture; a Christian attitude toward violence. The thesis: we should not retaliate since God is perfect noncoercive love. Soon you would discover that it takes the quiet of a suburb home for the birth of the thesis that human nonviolence corresponds to God's refusal to judge. In a scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, it will invariably die” (from *Exclusion and Embrace*, p. 304). Only the promise that God is watching, that he loves and cares deeply, and that He will one day make all things right will keep the victim of great tragedy from picking up the sword and taking revenge. His

judgment saves us from the unjust and imprecise judgments of one another. *In response, without a judging God, what will keep people from perpetuating endless cycles of violence against one another?*

Doesn't judgment fly in the face of Jesus's mercy and grace? The Bible is clear that God desires that no one be excluded from eternity in His loving presence (2 Peter 3:9). The offer of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone is genuinely offered to any and everyone (John 3:16-17; 2 Peter 3:9). And even for those who openly reject Jesus and everything that He is about, He continues to pour out His common grace and favor on them in tangible ways (Matthew 5:43-48). It is amazing to consider that, even for someone who hates Jesus, every genuinely good thing that they will ever encounter in life is a direct blessing from God Himself (Acts 14:15-17). Looked at from another angle, God's judgment against those who refuse to be saved and changed by Jesus *is itself* an act of mercy toward those who have been victimized by those peoples' sin and evil. God will lovingly protect the humble and the vulnerable from oppression into eternity future, but this requires a judgment to take place. *In response, how could God extend mercy and grace to a people without protecting them from those who would harm them?*

How could Hell possibly be just? The doctrine of Hell is difficult to discuss not necessarily because of the bible's teachings, but often because of the medieval speculations that have continued to shape our imaginations. Graphic depictions of Hell as a kind of disgusting torture chamber where God (or Satan) gets sadistic joy have been hugely influential on our thinking (think Dante's *Inferno*). A return to (and not beyond) the biblical data is necessary—although without the time to do an in-depth study here, a few short points will have to do. Hell is a concept that is present in part in the Old Testament but really illuminated in the New Testament (in fact, Jesus spoke of Hell more than any other Biblical figure). It is important to remember that much of what we learn about Hell in the Bible is presented within parables (Luke 16:19-31; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43); using prophetic language (Matthew 5:30; 2 Chronicles 28:1-4); in symbol-rich apocalyptic literature (Revelation 20:11-15); and likely with metaphoric implication (compare the image of “unquenchable fire” in Matthew 3:12 with “outer darkness” in Matthew 8:12). The Bible makes it clear that Hell is real, eternal, and contains the ideas of punishment, destruction, and banishment. The banishment idea is the flipside of protection—when God completes His work of redeeming/restoring the creation in the New Heavens and New Earth and brings His kingdom into its full reality, He will protect the world, the kingdom, and His people from the sin and evil of those who refused Jesus as Lord. Combined with what we know of the general character of God, these ideas paint a much more understandable and even necessary picture of what it might mean for God to remove people from not only His relational presence, but from the presence of the covenant people He means to protect. *In response, what else should be done with people who refuse to enter into ultimate peace with God and fellow man?*

Jesus has already borne the world's judgment. The whole point of the cross is that Jesus has already borne the judgment of God against sin and evil. In a certain sense, Jesus has already suffered Hell—experiencing punishment, destruction, and banishment on the agonizing cross that ultimately took His life outside the walls of Jerusalem (Isaiah 53). Though every person has embraced sin and evil in many ways, He did this in the place of anyone who would repent and trust in Him for salvation. His offer is extended to any and everyone who would receive it. In a very powerful sense, if you are in Christ, you have already had your judgment day. You can walk with confidence before the Father knowing that your sins have already been dealt with legally and will be dealt with actually in the resurrection life to come. “For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Accepting the Judge sermon by Tim Keller – Great 45-minute sermon unpacking why a God of judgment is necessary for peace, justice, and hope. Available through the Gospel in Life podcast. [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tFLGkIAJjY>]

Weeds and Wheat sermon by Tim Mackie – Another sermon from Door of Hope's study of the Gospel According to Matthew looking at Jesus's parable of the Weeds and Wheat (Matthew 13:24-30). [<http://www.doorofhopepdx.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Weeds-and-Wheat.mp3>]

The Skeletons in God's Closet video lecture by Joshua Ryan Butler - A 90-minute talk given at Multnomah University summarizing the key themes of the book mentioned below, specifically the doctrine of hell. The book of the same title is also an excellent resource. [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MreUv-lzb1g>]

Is God a Moral Monster? by Paul Copan (book, available on Amazon) – Copan takes on some of the most difficult questions dealing with God's justice (primarily related to the Old Testament) and gives helpful responses rooted in a deep understanding not only of the Bible, but of the ancient Near Eastern world.

For Views on Hell edited by William Crockett – This book has representatives from four views on hell (literal, metaphorical, purgatorial, and conditional) presenting their views and then having each critiqued by each of the other three scholars. A little dry, but a good way to enter into the interpretive issues surrounding the subject. There is also a second edition of the book edited by Preston Sprinkle with different contributors.