

THE WORD OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

Negative Consequences of Judgment

According to the Scriptures, all believers will appear before the judgment seat of Christ to receive a reward, recompense, and repayment for the things done through the body during their lifetime (Rom. 14:10-12; 2 Cor. 5:10). There is a positive issue of this judgment for those overcoming believers who are wise, faithful, and fruitful; they will receive a reward as the outcome and overflow of their life and work in this age. A complete view of the judgment of the believers, however, must include details of some of the negative issues of judgment. This article draws much of its motivation from the review of four recent publications covering the judgment seat of Christ contained in the previous issue of *Affirmation & Critique*, reiterating and expanding upon certain of its themes. As pointed out in that review, the truth of the believers' accountability to God for their life and work has some voice in the writing of four contemporary Christian authors, but the truth is partial, incomplete, and often misleading. In particular, the negative consequences of the believers' judgment have not been adequately taught.

In "The Judgment Seat of Christ," Mark Bailey says, "The judgment of the righteous will result in more or less rewards" (95). In *Your Eternal Reward*, Erwin W. Lutzer speaks of "appropriate rewards either given or withheld" (79). *This Was Your Life!* by Rick Howard and Jamie Lash, states, "The issue at the judgment of believers is not punishment. God will be looking for things to reward!" (10). Rather, they say, this judgment will issue in "degrees of reward for the saved" (25), resulting in "important distinctions in the kingdom" (Lutzer 151), such as "different ranks in heaven" and "differences in proximity to the Throne of God" (Howard, *Judgment* 62-63). Those whose life and works have merit will participate in the "aristocracy of heaven," having "greater positions of responsibility" in heaven, "a richer experience" of ruling with Christ, and "additional benefits" in the kingdom (*Judgment* 55; Lutzer 43, 54, 60). On the contrary, those who have nothing to commend will be clad "only in basic white," not in "dazzling and beautiful" garments (Howard

69). "The greatest horror of the Judgment Seat of Christ," Howard says, will be our remorse over earthly failures in light of the revelation of God's purpose and expectations for us (*Judgment* 64).

Lutzer, however, is more cognizant of suffering for believers on the day of judgment, predicting "tears...of regret and shame, tears of remorse" (9). Going beyond his contemporaries, he speaks of actual "negative consequences at the judgment seat of Christ," pointing out that "judicial forgiveness is one thing, but the discipline the Father inflicts on His wayward children is quite another" (73, 11). These negative consequences include the loss of approval by Christ, His reprimand, and being temporarily denied by Him, as well as being denied a higher degree of rule in the kingdom (72, 76-77). He is bold to refer to these consequences as the Father's discipline, even punishment, of His sons in the next age. He asks, "Is not the purpose of any judge to hand out rewards or punishment?" (71, 79). However, he vacillates, ameliorating his concept of punishment by offering as an example a father who "does not formally 'punish' his son for his negligence" but denies him a privilege and gives him a disapproving look, which is "punishment enough" (35).

Cast into Outer Darkness

If the works cited above are representative of the most enlightening statements in contemporary literature concerning the judgment seat of Christ and its negative issues, then there is a desperate need to study these matters more deeply. Here we will elaborate on three crucial passages in the New Testament, each of which exemplifies the discipline of unfaithful believers at Christ's judgment seat. The first passage concerns one who is cast into outer darkness, as mentioned in Matthew 25:30. Two other passages speak of outer darkness—Matthew 8:12 and 22:13. In the majority of expository literature, the interpretations of the kingdom of the heavens in Matthew 8 and of the wedding feast in chapter twenty-two are much

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encumbered with dispensational issues related to Israel and the Gentiles. For this reason, we will leave these great matters for separate and detailed examinations in future issues of this column. However, in the case of the parable of the talents in Matthew 25, the truth concerning the judgment of the believers is irrefutable.

In this parable, a man calls his own slaves and delivers to them his possessions, goes abroad, and after a long time returns to settle accounts with them (vv. 14-30). Several key elements in this parable attest to the fact that this is a parable of the faithfulness of the believers in the church and their accountability to the Lord at His return. First, the man signifies Christ, who was about to go abroad, into the heavens, while His subjects are “his own slaves.” Slaves signify believers viewed from the aspect of service (1 Cor. 7:22-23; 2 Pet. 1:1; James 1:1; Rom. 1:1). The believers’ status in relation to Christ is of two aspects: in life they are virgins living for Him (Matt. 25:1-13); in service, in work, they are His purchased slaves serving Him. Second, the slaves were given the master’s possessions to exercise responsibility over them in his household. It is unprecedented and impossible for an unregenerated person to occupy a position of responsibility in the household of God, any more than a foreigner could serve as a priest in the tabernacle or temple of old. In the end, the distinction between profitable and unprofitable slaves is entirely a matter of faithfulness in service, not one of grace and free gift which would be the case if this were a parable of salvation and perdition. Any interpretation to the contrary would have to justify the prospect that the Lord has called unbelievers into the service of His house and upon His return will decide their reward based on their works. This, of course, is a gross perversion of the gospel.

When the master returns, one of the slaves is exposed as being slothful, having buried his talent in the earth. Verse 30 presents the Lord’s response: “And cast out the useless slave into the outer darkness. In that place there will be the weeping and the gnashing of teeth.” Since the useless slave is a believer, albeit unprofitable and unfaithful, being cast into outer darkness cannot refer to eternal perdition. Rather, it refers to dispensational punishment and disqualification from participating in the millennial kingdom and the enjoyment of the kingdom during the millennium for not having lived an overcoming life. Darkness is ranked with fire and gloom as a sign of God’s judgment (Heb. 12:18; 2 Pet. 2:17; Jude 13). Outer darkness is the darkness outside the bright glory in the manifestation of the kingdom of the heavens (Matt.

16:27-28). Being cast out into outer darkness in the coming kingdom age differs from being cast into the lake of fire after the millennium and for eternity (Rev. 20:15). In the millennium the overcoming believers will be with Christ in the bright glory of the kingdom (Col. 3:4), whereas the defeated believers will suffer discipline in outer darkness. Such a discipline of the Lord with weeping and gnashing of teeth is a severe and negative consequence of the Lord’s judgment of His slaves.

Beaten with Many Lashes

The parable of watchfulness in Luke 12:35-48 is in many ways similar to the parable of the talents. Again the Lord compares Himself to the master of the house, and the believers to household slaves, or stewards. Several points prove that these slaves and stewards are believers: The Lord is their “own” master (vv. 36, 45-46), they are set by Him in the service of His house (v. 42), they have the commission and the ability to feed the servants of His house, and they are expecting the coming of the Lord (vv. 43, 45). Moreover, the Lord’s word in verse 46 concerning the day and hour of His coming is very similar to His direct word to the disciples in Matthew 24:42-44, 25:13, and Mark 13:32.

Luke 12:46 says that when the Lord returns to the evil slave, He will “cut him asunder, and will appoint his portion with the unbelievers.” To be cut asunder is an ancient expression signifying a serious punishment. Here, it is to be cut off from the glorious Christ, from the glory of His kingdom, and from His glorious presence in His kingdom, unable to participate in Christ and the glory of His kingdom in the manifestation of the kingdom, which the faithful slaves will enjoy. To have a portion with the unbelievers is to be cut off from the Lord, from His presence, from His fellowship, and from the glorious sphere in which the Lord will be. It is not to perish eternally but to be chastened dispensationally. Verses 47 and 48 conclude this section, saying, “And that slave who knew his

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master’s will and did not prepare or do according to his will, will receive many lashes; but he who did not know, yet did things worthy of stripes, will receive few lashes.” Again, the fact that the slave knew his master’s will proves that this refers to a saved person, for an

unsaved person does not know the Lord’s will. Moreover, to say that it is the unbelievers who are beaten with lashes at the Lord’s coming is illogical and against the truth. There are not few lashes or many lashes for these; there is only perdition in the lake of fire.

Clearly then, unfaithful, unprofitable, and wicked slaves of Christ are chastened by the Lord at His coming. What is significant here is not how few lashes are “few” or how many lashes are “many,” but that any lashes at all can be laid upon the saved believer after his failure at the judgment seat of Christ. This is a negative issue of the judgment of the believers at Christ’s coming back.

Hurt by the Second Death

A third figure for the negative issue of the judgment of the believers is found in Revelation 2 at the close of the epistle to the church in Smyrna. Verse 11 says, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall by no means be hurt of the second death.” The first death, of course, is the expiration of man’s body, when it, being taken from dust, returns to the dust. The second death, however, is the lake of fire (20:14; 21:8). Fire, and the lake of fire in particular, is the ultimate figure of God’s judgment upon man.

Since the deluge, God, in accordance with His promise that He would not judge the earth and all living creatures again with water (Gen. 9:15), always exercises His judgment upon man with fire (Gen. 19:24; Lev. 10:2; Num. 11:1; 16:35; Dan. 7:11; Rev. 14:10; 18:8; 19:20; 20:9-10; 21:8). God’s throne of judgment is like the fiery flame out of which a fiery stream issues (Dan. 7:9-10). The flame of God’s judging fire sweeps all negative things in the entire universe into this glassy sea, which eventually becomes the lake of fire (20:14). (Recovery Version, Rev. 4:6, note 1)

On the positive side, the Lord promises the overcomers in the church in Smyrna that He will give them the crown of life (Rev. 2:10), while on the negative side, He promises that they will not be touched by the second death (v. 11). Because of the fall and the entering in of sin, every man is appointed to die once (Heb. 9:27). This first death, however, is not the final settlement of man’s problem with God. All the dead, except those who through faith in the Lord Jesus have been recorded in the book of life, will be resurrected and will pass through the judgment of the great white throne at the close of the millennium. As a result of this judgment, the condemned ones will all be cast into the lake of fire, which is the second death, as the final settlement (Rev. 20:11-15). The principle of the second death, therefore, is that God judges and deals with man according to His government after man’s death and resurrection.

The church in Smyrna prefigures the church in a time of extreme persecution. As the First and the Last, who became dead and lived again (2:8), the Lord encourages this church so that she may endure all kinds of suffering, however severe they may be. As in all the epistles in Revelation 2 and 3, the Lord’s call for overcomers implies that some among the suffering believers will be overcomers, while some will not. Those who do not overcome persecution by the riches of the Lord’s resurrection life will be counted as unfaithful and will require some kind of just discipline by the Lord. However, since the overcomers in Smyrna will have overcome death through their faithfulness unto death under persecution and will require no further dealing by God after their resurrection, they will be rewarded with the crown of life and will no longer be touched by death after their resurrection; that is, they will not be hurt by the second death.

Those readers who have been nurtured in the Reformation doctrines of salvation and perdition may indeed bristle at the concept that a believer in Christ, saved by faith and eternally assured of that salvation, may be touched by the second death, that is, by the lake of fire. Govett well expresses first our alarm and then our necessary attitude when reading Revelation 2 and 20:

How strangely these words sound in our ears, if once we listen to their evident meaning! “The *conqueror* is to escape all touch of the lake of fire! Why, I thought,—I have always believed,—that this is the lowest and surest advantage, common to *all the saved!* Does it not belong to every believer?”

It would seem not. We must make room for scripture truths in our system; not cut and clip scripture to our systems. What is the evident implication of these two agreeing passages? Clearly, that it is *possible* that some believers, members of the churches of Christ, may be hurt by the second death....The overcomer shall not be hurt by the second death, in consequence of his victory. Shall not

then, the one so conquered be hurt by it, in consequence of his defeat? (*Revelation* 100-102)

The Lord’s warning in Revelation 2:11 reflects His word to His disciples in Matthew 10:28 and Luke 12:4-5. In Matthew 10 He says, “And do not

fear those who kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in Gehenna.” Gehenna is a deep valley near Jerusalem, where refuse was cast for burning. Because of its continual fire, it became the symbol of the place of eternal

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punishment, the lake of fire. Since the Lord's word here was spoken to His apostles, however, the sense of the allusion is temporary, rather than eternal, punishment. The Lord's word in Matthew 10 implies that if the apostles sent by the Lord fail to suffer persecution, they will be disciplined by God. This discipline will take place in the coming age, after the judgment at the judgment seat of Christ, when the believers will receive reward or punishment. Such a strong word from the Lord strengthened and motivated His disciples as they entered their long course of sufferings and deprivations. "What is this but to tell the believer, that it is better to suffer at man's hand his worst inflictions, than to suffer from God both before and after death?" (*Revelation* 103).

It is difficult for anyone to say clearly what it means to be hurt by the second death. To be sure, it does not mean that the one disciplined will be lost, for every saved one is saved for eternity. John 10:28 and 29 show us that no saved one can ever perish. (We can see this in the important distinction in Revelation 20:14 and 2:11 between being "cast into" the lake of fire and "hurt" by the second death.) However, after we have been resurrected, we may suffer some dealings from the Lord. We must not negate the Lord's warning by holding to a theology that teaches that everything will be all right after we are resurrected. After the unbelievers are resurrected, they will be dealt with by God regarding their eternal destiny. In the same principle, after our own resurrection, there will still be some dealings from the Lord. If we live and walk in an overcoming way, this will indicate that we have overcome death and that nothing remains that requires a further dealing from the Lord. If we do not overcome, however, there will be some suffering.

The truth of a judgment for believers after their resurrection has been veiled for a long time. Few Christians dare to touch it, and since they are unable to understand it, their practice has been to neglect and ignore it. However, the Lord will never ignore His word. Therefore, we must

be warned that we need to overcome. If we do, we will receive a reward and not be disciplined by the Lord, but if we do not, something will remain that requires the Lord's further dealing in the future. "Is there no lot short of damnation or full salvation?" Govett asks, "Is there not also such a case as the 'suffering loss,' the 'escape as through fire?'" (*Parable* 20). The lot of those believers found wanting at the judgment seat of Christ includes some negative consequences of the Lord's judgment. To be sure, since such a dealing is signified by outer darkness, many lashes, and the second death, it will be more negative than is implied by "more or less rewards," "degrees of reward," the loss of "additional benefits," and a disapproving look which is "punishment enough." May we receive this warning from the Lord and live an overcoming life in the light of His judgment seat.

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GOD'S PLAN

The prevailing view of the goal of God's plan in Christianity is of heaven—a physical place of many mansions, of golden streets and pearly gates, and ultimately, of untold gratification. This seemingly encouraging view deprives believers of a vital and present contact with the Lord for the carrying out of His purpose. It also serves as a source of stumbling to many who view the Christian message, thus tainted, with disdain.

The goal of God's plan according to the Bible is not heaven, but the New Jerusalem.

HEAVEN

CHRISTIANITY

Although many of the "images" of heaven are derived from the biblical presentation of the New Jerusalem, these derivations are based on an incomplete and thoroughly flawed view of God's interaction with humanity. The New Jerusalem is not heaven, but rather a sign of God's ultimate union with redeemed humanity.

NEW JERUSALEM

A & C

In April 2000, *A & C* will examine the history, influence, and impact of the concept of heaven on the fulfillment of God's eternal plan, contrasting it with the Bible's presentation of the New Jerusalem. We invite you to join in this examination as we endeavor to purge out the leaven of heaven.