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God's Tests

By David Servant

TWELVE

The Judgment of God

He is the Lord our God; His judgments are in all the earth (Ps. 105:7).

God's judgment is certainly not the most popular sermon topic. Who loves to preach about God punishing the disobedient? Who loves to listen to such a sermon? Very few. Yet the fact remains that the Bible records hundreds of occasions when God's judgment fell on deserving people. We shouldn't hide our heads in the sand to this truth. And of course, God's judgment usually only falls after considerable longsuffering on His part. So anytime we focus on His judgment, we can also stand amazed at His prior mercy.

The Old Testament, of course, begins with an example of God's judgment, when Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden. Had the world's first couple heard a modern sermon about how God never punishes people because He is love, they would have rolled their eyeballs.

God revealed Himself as a God of judgment even before He punished Adam and Eve. When Satan rebelled, he was cast out of heaven (see Ezek. 28:12-19, Is. 14:12-17). Jesus Himself said that He watched Satan "fall from heaven like lightning" (Luke 10:18). The message is clear: Sin provokes God's wrath.

The Bible not only begins with an incident of God's judgment; it also ends with God's judgment. The book of Revelation is chock full of His judgments, and its final chapter concludes with a warning of the same:

I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book; if anyone adds to them, God shall add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book (Rev. 22:18-19).

Take note that passage didn't say, "They'll open the door to the devil if they add to this book because God is love and He would never harm anyone." No, Scripture said, "*God* shall add to him the plagues which are written in this book."

Certainly God is love (1 John 4:8). And because He is love, He *must* punish injustice. If God remained unconcerned when one of the objects of His love is harmed by another, He isn't loving at all. His love predicates His justice and His judgment.

Rather than listen to some TV preacher tell us what God is like, let's read how God describes Himself to Moses in Exodus 34:6-7:

Then the Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed: "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; *yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished*, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations" (Ex. 34:6-7, emphasis added).

God loves everyone—to the degree that He gives sinners extraordinary time to repent of their sins. He is slow to anger. When His mercy is refused, however, His wrath falls. The author of the book of Hebrews wrote, "It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31).

Does God Punish Grandchildren?

We just read from Exodus 34 about God "visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generation." Does that mean, as some claim, that God punishes people for their parents' or grandparents' sins?

No, that would be unjust, and God plainly stated that He would never do such a thing in Ezekiel 18:19-20:

Yet you say, "Why should the son not bear the punishment for the father's iniquity?" When a son has practiced justice and righteousness, and has observed all My statutes and done them, he shall surely live. The person who sins will die. *The son will not bear the punishment for the father's iniquity*, not will the father bear the punishment for the son's iniquity; the righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself (Ezek. 18:19-20, emphasis added).

So what did God mean when He said that He would visit the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren? Most likely, He meant that He will hold parents responsible (at least in part) for the sins that their children learned from them and which they consequently practice, and He will even hold them partly responsible for such sins committed all the way down through four generations. And *that* would be just. Jesus Himself said, "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it is better for him that a heavy millstone be hung around his neck, and that he be drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matt. 18:6). That gives us a good idea of how God views those who influence children to sin. He holds them accountable.

The Great Judge

If we wanted to, we could look at hundreds of examples in the Bible of God's judgment upon people and nations. In addition, we could look at hundreds of warnings of God's judgment upon people, nations, and the entire world. Of the sixty-six books in the Bible, I

can only find five (all very short books) that don't mention or in some way intimate something about the judgment of God.

So why is so much of the church today ignoring and downplaying the subject of God's judgment? Surely we're far from what the Bible teaches when we say that the reason there are earthquakes, famines, plagues, and so on is because Satan is the god of this world, and God would like to stop him but He can't. The Bible, in both Old and New Testaments, clearly states that all those things, often called "natural disasters," may occur as a result of God's judgment. They are, in fact, not "natural disasters" but "supernatural disasters."

God is a God of wrath as well as love. It was the God of love who opened the windows of heaven and flooded the earth until every human being was drowned except Noah and his family. It was the loving God who rained fire and brimstone down upon the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, wiping out the entire population except Lot and his family. It was the loving God who killed all the first-born in Egypt before the exodus of Israel. It was the loving God who commanded Israel to take Canaan's land by conquest and kill every man, woman, and child who lived there. It was the loving God who sent an angel who killed 185,000 Assyrian troops in one night as recorded in 2 Kings 19:35. And the list goes on and on and on.

In the New Testament, God does not change. He is still a God of judgment. Jesus died suffering God's judgment—not for His sins because He didn't have any—but as a substitute, bearing God's wrath in our place. Understanding God's judgment is essential if we are to understand what Christ did for us on the cross.

Ananias and Sapphira both fell dead during a church gathering as a result of God's judgment upon them for "lying to the Holy Spirit" (Acts 5:3).

Herod died as a result of God's judgment, when an angel of the Lord struck him for failing to give God glory (see Acts 12:20-23).

Paul wrote of God's judgment that had come upon the Jews who were hindering the spread of the gospel in his first letter to the Thessalonians (see 1 Thes. 2:14-16).

Peter once wrote that it was "time for judgment to begin with the household of God" (1 Pet. 4:17).

God's judgment upon the Jews of Jerusalem and Israel for their rejection of their Messiah fell in the form of a Roman holocaust in 70 A.D. (see Luke 19:41-44; 21:20-24).

In addition, the book of Revelation is primarily a record of God's future final judgments—the grand finale that every other previous judgment has only foreshadowed.

In light of the fact that the historical revelation of the Bible is full of clear examples of God's judgment coming upon nations in the form of enemy invasions, famines, plagues, and natural disasters, what can we conclude? Is it possible that God is still doing the same thing today? Has God changed?

We love to say that God is still the same when it comes to His saving, healing, or delivering mercies, but can we say He is still the same when it comes to His judgments?

Why then do so many modern preachers and teachers downplay God's active role in judgment upon sin, and worse, blame the devil for things that God takes responsibility for in Scripture?

The fact is, this phenomenon of an all-love-no-wrath God is rather novel. It wasn't that many years ago when no one would have blamed the devil for God's active judgment. As an example of the common conviction once held by just about everyone who professed to be a Christian, I thought you might find it interesting to read something Abraham Lincoln said at his second inaugural address during our nation's Civil War:

Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondman’s [slave’s] two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so it must still be said, “The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.”

I'm not claiming that Abraham Lincoln was infallible, but his understanding of the Bible is certainly more accurate than those who would claim that the devil caused the American Civil War and that God played no sovereign role. Abraham Lincoln apparently believed God was judging the United States for the sin of slavery. Just the fact that God guarantees we will reap what we sow is enough to prove that God is sovereign, and as Abraham Lincoln quoted, “the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.”

God’s Discipline of His Own Children

An unbalanced understanding of God’s judgment has also birthed a faulty understanding of God’s discipline of His own children. The writer of Hebrews states that “those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives.” He goes on to say that, “If you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons” (Heb. 12:6, 8).

In other words, if you’ve never experienced God’s discipline, you’re not a member of His family. Yet many professing Christians will scoff at such an idea, stating that our loving God has no part in any negative circumstance—and that God only disciplines us through His Word. In their thinking, God would never afflict a disobedient believer in order to bring him to repentance, even though the New and Old Testaments plainly teaches that concept (see Ps. 119: 67; 1 Cor. 11:27-32). If we are blind to God’s discipline in our lives, then when His discipline occurs, we’ll react by rebuking the devil rather than by repenting of our sins.

Let’s adjust our theology to fit the Bible rather than adjust the Bible to fit our theology! Whenever we find ourselves reading God’s Word and saying, “That can’t mean what it says, because that doesn’t fit what I believe,” then we’re headed for trouble.

In Conclusion

As we conclude this book’s second section, allow me to summarize the major points of the last six chapters.

- (1) God has sovereign control over His universe.
- (2) God has given every believer authority over Satan so far as his own life is concerned. It is every believer’s responsibility to use his God-given authority and resist Satan by believing and acting on God’s Word.
- (3) God is sovereign over Satan, and Satan can only do what God permits.
- (4) God has used and will use Satan as an agent of His wrath.
- (5) Satan only has authority to rule over the kingdom of darkness, that is, the domain of all who are not serving Jesus.
- (6) God has sovereign control over the forces of nature and over human governments.

With this foundation laid, we can now go on to study the lives of some very important Bible characters who were tested by a loving, holy, sovereign God. Most importantly, we will discover more of how God is working in our lives, so we can fulfill His plan for His glory.