

How Shall God Judge the World?

A Study on Romans 3:1-8

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In Romans 1:18-3:20 the Apostle Paul presents his logical proof that all men are sinners, devoid of any kind of righteousness in themselves that would make them acceptable to a holy God. He proves the pagan, the moral man, and the religious man guilty and standing in line for God's judgment. One reason Paul is so methodical in proving all men sinners and under God's wrath is so they will look outside of themselves for help. He wants them to look to the person of Jesus Christ who will give them a righteousness that is acceptable before God. This is spiritual righteousness that is accredited to a person's account the moment he believes on Jesus Christ: "And be found in him [Christ], not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith" (Phil. 3:9).

In Romans 2:17-3:8 Paul shows that the Jew is guilty before God. In a previous lesson we saw that the possession of the Mosaic Law did not exempt the Jew from God's judgment. The very law he possessed he could not keep. Thus, he was a sinner and stood in line for God's judgment. Paul also showed the Jew that circumcision in the flesh is only a symbol of what should be an inner reality. The Jew could be outwardly circumcised and not have a true heart relationship to God. Many were trusting their circumcision, their ancestry and law-keeping, for salvation rather than trusting in the holy, righteous and loving God. Paul reduced the Jew to a position of equality with the Gentile. Both were sinners. This brought up the problem of whether there was any advantage to being a Jew at all if possession of the Mosaic Law and having the sign of circumcision could not save.

The section we are dealing with in this lesson is not easy to interpret, and the essence of it will again be taken up in Romans 9. Here I will give the gist of the argument and take up the related subject of eternal punishment.

THE ADVANTAGE OF THE JEW — Romans 3:1-2

"What advantage then hath the Jew? or what profit is there of circumcision? Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God." The Jews had a tremendous advantage because they had been given the Old Testament, written revelation from God. God had also given them many wonderful promises: they were to have a great land, be a great nation, the world would be blessed through them, and the Messiah was to come through them. But this made the Jews proud, and they were not responsible in carrying out the Word, either in their own lives or in giving it to others.

There is an application for us. Today God has given Christians His written revelation in the Bible. Will we be like the Jews and become proud, or will this make us humble and cause us to feel the responsibility for sharing the Word with others? Jews, who had much light and did nothing with it, will have the greater judgment. The Protestant world has been given much light too, and if we do nothing with it, we too will have the greater judgment.

THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD — Romans 3:3-4

“For what if some did not believe? shall their unbelief make the faith of God without effect? God forbid; yea, let God be true, but every man a liar; as it is written, That thou mightest be justified in thy sayings, and mightest overcome when thou art judged.” What if the Jews did not believe and were not faithful to God? Would this destroy the faithfulness of God? Would he be like the Jews and forget his judgment upon them? No! God is true and every man a liar. Paul quotes the Old Testament to show that when men judge God they always find him to be true to his nature, and his judgment to be just.

God will not respect the religious heritage of the Jews. One’s religious background cannot make him a Christian. I have spoken to people about their need of Christ as personal Saviour and they reply, “My father is a Baptist minister,” or, “My sister is a fine Christian,” or, “I’m the daughter of a Methodist father.” It makes no difference if your grandmothers, grandfathers, mother and father — all your relatives — are Christians, because salvation cannot be inherited from kinfolds. You must be saved through the new birth and by trusting in Jesus Christ.

History has recorded that none the children of the famed evangelist D.L. Moody ever came to know Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Saviour. They could not get to heaven on their father’s reputation as a Christian.

THE JUDGMENT OF GOD - Romans 3:5, 6

“But if our unrighteousness commend the righteousness of God, what shall we say? Is God unrighteous who taketh vengeance? (I speak as a man) God forbid: for then how shall God judge the world?” If man’s sin stirs God’s righteousness against that sin, is God unrighteous for bringing his wrath upon sin? How wrong it is to speak of God as being unrighteous, for he is perfect righteousness! His judgment will be just. After all, God is going to judge the world in righteousness. Judgment upon sin is inevitable!

JUDGMENT BRINGS GLORY TO GOD — Romans 3:7-8

“For if the truth of God hath more abounded through my lie unto his glory; why yet am I also judged as a sinner? And not rather, (as we be slanderously reported, and as some affirm that we say,) Let us do evil, that good may come? whose damnation is just.” Paul shifts to the first person to soften his argument which is: If sin, which is part of the plan of God, brings glory to God (and it certainly will), then God will not judge me for my sin (which is a wrong conclusion). Thus, the more man sins, the more glory God is going to get, so let us keep sinning. Everything is going to turn out all right; the end justifies the means! The person who argues like this has a just condemnation! Sin will bring glory to God, but a holy God will judge sin and man is always held responsible for his acts! God must judge the evils of man’s heart.

I remember reading an illustration about a sailing ship on a voyage with a cargo of huge cannons. These guns were chained down so they could not move about as the ship rolled or tossed. A sailor carelessly managed to release one of the guns one day and did not properly fasten the chain again so the gun was free. A storm came up and the gun began to roll back and forth in the hold of the ship. As the storm mounted in fury, the gun rolled back and forth and began to batter against the bulkhead of the ship. It was soon apparent that the ship was in grave danger because the gun was about to batter its way through the side of the ship. The man who was responsible for leaving the gun loose slipped into the hold and, at the risk of his life, managed to get hold of the gun and fasten a rope around it. Each time he would make a move, the gun would lurch and he would barely escape with his life. He finally secured the gun. When the danger was over, the captain called him up on deck and gathered the whole ship’s company together. He commended the sailor for his bravery and his heroism and gave him an award — a cash prize that would be his when the ship docked. The man began to feel proud of himself because it had all worked out so wonderfully. But as soon as the captain had concluded the words of commendation, he ordered the man to be tied to the mast and shot through the head for his carelessness which resulted in putting the ship in danger.

This shows us something of God’s character. His justice cannot overlook sin. He sees us for what we are. None of our hollow defenses can fool him. How we cling to our pride, self-respect, self-confidence. How we hate to be stripped of our defenses! But this is sure to come about in God’s judgment. God wants man to swallow his pride and come to the Lord Jesus Christ as an undone sinner for salvation.

A LITERAL HELL

The doctrine of a literal hell is not popular today, but it is biblical. Some people call themselves Christians but do not believe in a literal hell, yet the Bible teaches it and we should not deny it or pretend it is not there. This doctrine contends that men exist forever and must, because of the unavoidable divine judgment for sin (in every form), be forever separated from God in a state which is conscious torment. If law is to have authority, there must be punishment and enforcement of that punishment. Man has broken God's law because of sin, and sin must be punished or God's law has no authority. Jesus Christ had more to say about eternal punishment than anyone else.

A number of different words are used to describe or designate hell, and some are translated "hell."

1) "Hades" is the state of death, the grave, a place of punishment: "And in hell [hades] he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom" (Luke 16:23).

2) "Gehenna" is the word translated "hell" in Matt. 23:33: "Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?" The name was originally applied to a valley southwest of Jerusalem. It was the place where wicked idolators sacrificed their children to Molech by causing them to pass through the fire. Hence it was considered impure and was called the "Valley of Spittle," an utterly despised region. Fires were continually burning there to consume the refuse of Jerusalem. As a result it became a symbol of the place of eternal torment.

3) "Tartarus" is a part of hell for angels who sinned: "For if God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell [Tartarus], and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment" (2 Pet. 2:4).

4) The "abyss" or bottomless pit is the name used for hell in Rev. 9:1,2,11. Verse 2 says, "And he opened the bottomless pit; and there arose a smoke out of the pit, as the smoke of a great furnace; and the sun and the air were darkened by reason of the smoke of the pit."

5) The "lake of fire" describes hell in Rev. 20:14,15. "And death and hell (hades) were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire."

The story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31 is an account of what goes on in hell.

From the accounts in God's Word, we conclude that heaven and hell are definite places.

The punishment in hell is described as:

1) Eternal fire: "Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt 25:41).

2) Outer darkness: "But the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 8:12).

3) Torment: "And he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb: and the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever: and they have no rest day nor night" (Rev. 14:10b-11a).

4) Eternal punishment: "And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal" (Matt. 25:46).

5) Wrath of God: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness" (Rom. 1:18).

6) Second death: "But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death" (Rev. 21:8).

7) Eternal destruction: "Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power" (2 Thess. 1:9).

8) Damnation (condemnation): "And not rather, (as we be slanderously reported, and as some affirm that we say,) Let us do evil, that good may come? whose damnation is just" (Rom. 3:8). "But he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost hath never forgiveness, but is in danger of eternal damnation" (Mark 3:29).

9) Perdition: "But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition" (1 Tim. 6:9).

These descriptive words are figurative language to explain the realities of hell. All figurative language has a literal truth to point out. This language speaks of separation and punishment.

What will the punishment be? It will be total absence of favor with God; total separation from God; an endless disturbance of life because of the dominion of sin; physical suffering in body and soul; and spiritual and mental suffering.

Is the punishment eternal? The word eternal is used of God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, life, etc. It is used seven times in connection with the destiny of the wicked (Matt. 18:8; 25:41,46; Mark 3:29; 2 Thess. 1:9; Heb. 6:2; Jude 1:7). Eternal punishment and eternal bliss are placed side by side in Matthew 25:46. Punishment is described as “unquenchable fire,” and as a place where the “worm never dies” in Mark 9:48. It was said of Judas, the son of perdition, that it would have been better if he had never been born (Matt. 26:24). This would hardly be said of a man who might have a second chance or be restored millennia later, or even of one who was simply annihilated at death. Torment of those who worship the beast is said to be forever and ever (Rev. 14:10-11). The beast and the false prophet are alive after 1,000 years of punishment in the lake of fire (Rev. 19:20 cf. 20:10).

What will be the degree of punishment? Men’s punishment will be commensurate with their sinning against the light which they have received, but nevertheless it will be eternal for all of them. (Luke 12:47,48; 20:17; Rom. 2:5,6; Matt. 11:24; Rev. 20:12,13).

CONCLUSION

Some time ago Dr. Gowland of Methodist College in England spoke in our city and said something like this:

“Heaven is not a place; hell is not a place. There will be no brimstone and no pearly gates and we will not join a choir to sing. When Jesus descended into hell as the Apostles Creed declares, it was to the depths that a spirit can go. Eternal life doesn’t mean endlessness. It has nothing to do with time. Eternal life is a quality of depth, not length. Heaven and hell are qualities of the mind. We don’t know what heaven and hell are like, for no one has gone and returned. And there are no thought forms to describe dimensions not entered.”

Will we believe the Bible or will we believe what men think the Bible should teach? Liberal ministers, who are deceiving millions of people, young and old, shall have the greater condemnation. The Bible teaches eternal punishment. If a man does not want to believe it, that is his business — but he certainly should not call himself a Christian.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world: but that the world

through him might be saved. He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved. But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God” (John 3:16-21).