

THE LAST JUDGMENT

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Towson Presbyterian Church
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Numbers 21:4-9

John 3:14-21

One of the more interesting courses I took in seminary was a seminar on “Heaven and Hell.” You may think Heaven and Hell are fairly basic notions that even kids in Sunday School can readily understand. But they turn out to be much more complex in practice. The church’s teaching about them has undergone dramatic swings over the centuries. “[In the Middle Ages,] the last judgment and the unquenchable flames of hell were...favorite themes for Christian instruction. Not that the teachers and preachers of [even then] were ever of one mind when they spoke of heaven and hell. Some [believed], for instance,...that among the joys of heaven would be a clear view of the lost souls in hell below. Others, softer-hearted, believed that as long as there remained even one lost soul in hell, there could be no rest in heaven.

“[These days], we no longer hear much either way about heaven and hell. Times have changed, and you may not recall when you last heard a sermon on hell. [Presbyterians usually leave] hell to the popular evangelists, and we count ourselves too sophisticated to believe in red devils and their steaming cauldrons.

“Yet, even when we have decided that the unquenchable flames are not to be taken literally, there remains a great deal about judgment in our Scriptures. It should not go unheeded. It still demands our attention. What are we to make of it? I suspect that enough of the old, literal hell lingers on in our childhood memories [to make us wonder about] God’s character...and trouble our faith. If we turn to our New Testaments, we may be surprised by what we find there on the theme of judgment. It is written of Christ that he came not to judge, but to seek and to save the lost.¹ His story is a story of judgment withheld. The gospel reassures us that God is always pure love, and that only our unbelief can change God’s love into an unintended judgment.

“There are, then, three things that [I’d like us to] think about [this fourth Sunday in Lent]: *judgment unheeded*, or the decline of belief in hell; *judgment withheld*, since Christ judged no one, as had been expected, but came only to save; and *judgment unintended*, because we judge ourselves, without meaning to, by what we make of God’s love in Christ.

“Consider first the decline of belief in hell—*judgment unheeded*. In some ways, this is a mark of progress. The elaborate portrayal of demons with pitchforks casting sinners into the unquenchable flames goes back to a time when few could read and pictures were among the church’s most effective methods of instruction. Sometimes the images even had a touch of humor to them, since medieval men and women had a surprising ability to chuckle at the antics of devils even while taking them seriously. But

¹ John 12:47; Luke 19:10.

the impression on the mind of a child could be devastating. And in time it became harder even for adults to separate out the core of truth in the pictures.

“C. S. Lewis made the point effectively in the first chapter of his...book, *The Pilgrim’s Regress*. [His character,] Young John, born in Puritania, is dressed up and taken to see the ‘Steward’ (that is, the local minister). His parents go into the Steward’s room first, and when they come out again, they are looking very grim, as if they’ve just been given bad news by the doctor. To John’s surprise, as he takes his turn and enters the room, he is met by ‘an old man with a red, round face who was very kind and full of jokes.’ The conversation turns to fishing tackle and bicycles, and John’s fears are quite forgotten.

“But then, suddenly, the kindly old man takes down from the wall a terrifying mask, claps it over his face, and tells John about the Landlord—who is very, very kind [but], if John doesn’t keep all the rules, will send him forever to a black hole full of snakes and scorpions.

“The talk ends with the Steward repeating that the Landlord is ‘quite extraordinarily kind and good to his tenants, [but] would certainly torture most of them to death the moment he had the slightest pretext.’ But as John and his parents are leaving, the Steward bends down and whispers in his ear: ‘I shouldn’t bother about it all too much if I were you.’²

“[The disconnect between hell-and-damnation religion and the God we have come to know in Jesus Christ could hardly be made clearer]. The black hole remains only as an instrument to frighten a child into conformity. And the result is that the child has no peace day or night ‘for thinking of the rules and the black hole full of snakes.’ It is surely no great loss if we have come to recognize, these days, that more harm than good is done by filling a young child’s mind with thoughts of physical torment.

“Indeed, [the insight] that young minds cannot handle thoughts of devils and the flames of hell is not so modern...as we imagine. [The father of Presbyterianism, the sixteenth century reformer,] John Calvin,...said time and time again that the flames of hell are not to be taken literally[; Calvin] didn’t include hell in his Geneva Catechism. He found no mention of it in the [earliest versions of the] Apostles’ Creed, and thought it best left out of the catechism. [Catechisms, as you may know, use a series of questions and answers to teach the principles of the faith. Calvin’s] has the minister ask: ‘Why . . . is there mention [in the Creed] only of eternal life and not of hell?’ And the child is to answer: ‘Since nothing is held by faith except what contributes to the consolation of the souls of the pious.’³ Only what ‘contributes to the consolation of the souls of the pious’! Not exactly a child’s language, but the point is clear: Hell is not [a subject that builds up the morals or knowledge]—not for young minds.

“But what of *adult* minds? Well, [we adults] perhaps should be better able to ask what truth gave rise to the frightening image of unquenchable flames, and how it can stand alongside the fundamental Christian belief that the Landlord is ‘very, very kind.’

² C. S. Lewis, *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, 3rd Ed. (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1945), 21-22.

³ John Calvin, ‘Geneva Catechism’ in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, trans. J. K. S. Reid, Library of Christian Classics, 26 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 22:104.

The decline of the old belief in a physical hell cannot allow us to leave every thought of judgment unheeded. Much of the medieval imagery of hell has no direct basis in our Bibles, and we are not bound to keep it forever. But the unquenchable fire does! It was one of the images used to foretell the coming of the Savior. Which brings me to our second theme: *judgment withheld*.

“The one who prepared the way for Christ, in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy⁴, was John the Baptist. John did not expect the ‘Day of the Lord’ to be merely the rescue of Israel from her oppressors; like [the prophet] Amos⁵, [John the Baptist] foresaw it as a day when [the nation] Israel herself would be judged. [The Baptist] spoke of the wrath to come, and warned that whereas he himself baptized with water, the one who was to come would baptize with the fire of judgment. John pictured the Coming One as a farmer, who, when the wheat has been threshed, tosses the wheat and chaff into the air to separate out the grain. ‘The chaff [—the worthless parts—] he will burn with unquenchable fire.’⁶

“The image of the farmer with winnowing fork in hand is a vivid and powerful one. But does it fit Jesus of Nazareth? That’s the question. True, Jesus could speak a harsh word on occasion; but he did not bring about the judgment John had expected. The impression Jesus made, when he came into Galilee preaching the gospel of the kingdom, was not at all like John the Baptist’s grim figure of power and doom. [The] Old Testament image [that] fit Jesus [was] that of the ‘suffering servant,’ of whom Isaiah wrote that he would not raise his voice in the streets and would not break a bruised reed or put out a smoldering wick.⁷

“Jesus, when he came, pronounced his woes on the scribes and Pharisees.⁸ But he lamented over Jerusalem, and chose an image for himself that stood in striking contrast to the expectations of John the Baptist: ‘Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!’⁹

“The baptism with fire [that John the Baptist expected] seems to have been withheld, and it is no wonder that John . . . sent his perplexed inquiry from prison: ‘Are you he who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’¹⁰ John did not live to see the most astonishing reversal of all: instead of the severe judgment that John foresaw, it was Jesus himself who was put on trial, found guilty, and put to death.

“Then is there no divine judgment at all? [One answer is suggested by this morning’s text from the gospel of John, Chapter 3]: We have to consider, thirdly, a *judgment unintended*, but real nonetheless. [Our text this morning follows immediately the nighttime meeting between Jesus and the Pharisee named Nicodemus. Jesus has told Nicodemus that one enters the kingdom of God not by moral achievement but by a

⁴ Malachi 4:5; Matthew 11:14.

⁵ Amos 5:18.

⁶ Matthew 3:12.

⁷ Mathew 12:19-20.

⁸ Matthew 23.

⁹ Matthew 23:37.

¹⁰ Matthew 11:3.

transformation wrought by God—through the waters of baptism and the gift of God’s Spirit. The gift is there for all—like the light of the sun on a cloudless day. Yet even this] revelation of purest love makes a division among us, between those who discern it and those who turn their eyes from the light. Judgment was not the purpose of Christ’s mission, but it was in fact one result of it. For ‘this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light.’

“But if this is the judgment, then everything looks different in its light. The lifting up of the Savior on the cross does not seem at all like the exaltation of a king in glory; but in fact it draws everyone to Christ, and so it is the judgment of the world.¹¹ The sentence is not in the far-off future, at the end of time; it is now, and those who do not see with the eyes of faith are sentenced already.¹² It is not God or Christ who sentences them; we all judge ourselves by what we make of the cross. [For some, as Paul said,¹³ will see the cross as foolishness, reject the idea that the greatest power in life is in a love that pours itself out for others, that uses its strength to serve the lowest and meanest, rather than to build itself at their expense.]

“And what is the penalty for unbelief? It is not that we condemn ourselves to be cast into the flames of a literal hell, but that we choose to live without the fullness of God’s love in Christ...

“The gravest problem with the old ‘fire and brimstone’ preaching was that it assumed an impossible contradiction in the nature of God: if the sinner did not choose to have the love of God, he or she had to have the justice of God. [In the Great Awakening of colonial America,] Jonathan Edwards, in his famous sermon ‘Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,’ warned the unconverted in his congregation how excellent God’s love is, but how terrible God’s wrath. God, he said, abhorred them and held them over the pit of hell ‘much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect, over the fire.’¹⁴ And they would be tormented in the presence of the Lamb.

“[The gospel of John], by contrast, though [it] knows of God’s wrath¹⁵, teaches the profound truth that the judgment has its source in God’s love, if we turn away from it; and our turning away from it is its own sufficient penalty.

“If I disparage some great work of art, the judgment turns back on myself, and I deprive myself of something of value.

“When Mephistopheles makes his first appearance in [Christopher Marlowe’s play, *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*,] Faustus asks him why, if he is in truth a devil, he is not in hell. Mephistopheles answers: ‘Why this is hell, nor am I out of it.’¹⁶ He has deprived himself of the presence of God. That is his hell.

“A wise Christian was asked how God, if God is merciful, could deprive anyone of the kingdom. He answered: ‘Why do you keep moving your head?’ ‘Because the sun

¹¹ John 12:31-32.

¹² John 3:18.

¹³ 1 Corinthians 1:18.

¹⁴ Jonathan Edwards, *Representative Selections*, ed. Clarence H. Faust and Thomas H. Johnson, American Century Series (New York: Hill & Wang, 1962), 164-168.

¹⁵ John 3:36.

¹⁶ Christopher Marlowe, *The Tragicall History of D. Faustus*, 1.312.

gets in my eyes,' was the reply. And the saint remarked: 'Exactly. God doesn't keep anyone out of the kingdom, but there are some who cannot bear the light.'¹⁷

“‘This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light.’ I would not venture to claim that this is all the New Testament says about judgment. But it surely is what is most important. It carries our thoughts back to the unquenchable flame of which John the Evangelist wrote in the prologue to his Gospel: ‘The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.’^{18,19}

In these final weeks of Lent, may our lives be suffused and transformed by the light of God's love. Amen.

¹⁷ The 'saint' was Innocent of Alaska. See further B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

¹⁸ John 1:5 (RSV).

¹⁹ B. A. Gerrish, *The Pilgrim Road* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 107-112.