

Toward a Biblical Theology of God’s Judgment: A Celebration of the Cross in Seven Phases of Divine Universal Judgment (An Overview of a Theocentric- Christocentric Approach)

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The Scriptural teaching about judgment lies at the center of God’s revelation. It is a crux of the biblical message, giving a profound paradigm for our thinking. Next to the fundamental proclamation that God is the Creator (Gen 1–2), the Lord is presented as the Judge: In the Garden of Eden there is the first reference to the trial judgment (Gen 3:8–24),¹ where the grace and justice of God are intermingled.² The biblical Flood narrative is an account about judgment (Gen 6–9).³ Abraham called God “the Judge of all the earth” (Gen 18:25). Two biblical books carry the concept of judgment in their titles: the book of Judges and the book of Daniel.⁴

¹Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 254: “The purpose of the trial scene is to make clear to the man and the woman what they have done.”

²Grace was demonstrated because the first couple did not die in the day when they ate from the forbidden fruit, as promised by God (Gen 2:16–17; 3:9), and the proto-Gospel with the promise of the seed and victory over the serpent was given (Gen 3:15). See Afolarin Olutunde Ojewole, “The Seed in Genesis 3:15: An Exegetical and Intertextual Study” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Andrews University, 2002). Justice was exhibited because they were expelled from the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:24) and later died (Gen 5:5).

The very first question of God: “Where are you?” was manifold in purpose. It was an invitation of grace to a dialogue, then a help to materialize where they were in their relationship with God (instead of enjoying His presence they were afraid of Him and hiding), and finally it was also a call to responsibility for their past sinful action.

³Richard M. Davidson, “The Flood,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 261–263; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word, 1987), 155–166.

⁴The book of Judges is called in Hebrew as *shophtim*, derived from the root *shāpat*, “to judge.” The Hebrew name “Daniel” means “God is my Judge.” In a sense we all bear the symbolic name

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Daniel contains the best heavenly judgment scene ever recorded in the Scriptures (Dan 7). Prophets as servants of the covenant speak eloquently about God's impending and eschatological judgments (e.g., Joel 3:12; Jonah 3:4; Hos 1:8; 2:23; Amos 5:18–20; Isa 6:1–13; 26:9–11; Jer 11:20; Ezek 7:3–4; 9:1–11; 18:30). Additionally, wisdom literature paints the judgment picture (e.g., Job 19:25, 29; Ps 50:6; 96:13; Eccl 12:13–14). Also New Testament passages point clearly to the same reality (e.g., Matt 16:27; 25:31–46; Rom 2:16; 14:10; 2 Cor 5:10; 2 Tim 4:1–2, 8; Heb 9:27). The book of Revelation cannot be understood without grasping this decisive work of God. It not only contains scattered references to the theme of judgment, but this thought is an integral part of the essential kerygma of that book (6:10; 11:17–18; 15:3–4; 16:5–7).⁵ Thus these samples from the first pages of the Bible to the last book of Revelation not only convincingly demonstrate before readers the significance of the theme of judgment, but also provide crucial insights into the unfolding drama of God's judging activity.

Judgment is an integral part of God's nature; it is His characteristic divine prerogative. To understand God means to know and comprehend His judgments, which are very comprehensive. Through the study of His judgments, we can know who He is and what is His character. God actually invites us to understand His judgments in order to be able to deliberately declare that He is love and justice (Rom 3:4; Pss 51:4; 34:8; Phil 2:10–11), because His word and character were challenged and ridiculed from the very beginning (Gen 3:1–5; Ezek 28:16 [the Hebrew root *rākal* can also mean “go around to gossip or slander”⁶]; Isa 14:12–15; Job 1:6–12).⁷

In the Bible there is a twofold definition of God's judgment: positive and negative.⁸ Both aspects are usually presented and are complementary, but it is

Daniel, because God is Judge of all of us. In the book of Revelation the last, seventh church is named “Laodicea” (Rev 3:14–22), which means “people of judgment.”

⁵Ranko Stefanovic, *The Book of Revelation* (Berrien Springs: Andrews UP, 2002), 31, 365–367, 523–572; Craig S. Keener, *Revelation*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 44–46, 372–482; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 271–367.

⁶Richard M. Davidson, “Satan's Celestial Slander,” *Perspective Digest* 1/1 (1996): 31–34.

⁷See, Jose M. Bertoluci, “The Son of the Morning and the Guardian Cherub in the Context of the Controversy Between Good and Evil” (Th.D. Dissertation, Andrews University, 1985); Gregory A. Boyd, *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997); *ibid.*, *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001); Christian Breuninger, “Where Angels Fear to Tread: Appraising the Current Fascination with Spiritual Warfare,” *Covenant Quarterly* 53 (1995): 37–43; Peggy Day, *An Adversary in Heaven: Satan in the Hebrew Bible*, Harvard Semitic Monographs 43 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988); Stephen T. Davis, *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy*, new ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001); Tremper Longman and Daniel G. Reid, *God is a Warrior*. Studies in Old Testament Biblical Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

⁸From the very beginning of God's revelation these two indispensable aspects of judgment are practiced. For example: 1) in the story of Adam's fall into sin, God condemns but also saves and

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necessary to emphasize that the primary meaning is undeniably a judgment in favor of God's faithful people (Deut 32:36; 1 Chron 16:33–35; Dan 7:22; Heb 9:27–28). When God judges, it means first of all that He justifies, delivers, saves, vindicates, and protects.⁹ Judgment means justification, salvation, deliverance, and vindication. There are many examples of this positive aspect of the judgment of God, because biblical teaching about judgment is first of all redemptive in nature (Ps 76:8–9).¹⁰ David can ask God: "Judge me, O Lord"¹¹ (Ps 7:8), because he knows that judgment is a vindication; it is God's intervention on behalf of the saints; it is His vindication against our enemies. In the divine heavenly court, judgment is pronounced "in favor of the saints of the Most High" (Dan 7:22). Nothing can be better than this forensic proclamation, because on this verdict depends the eternal life of the redeemed.

However, those who choose not to be positively judged by God, those who refuse to accept God's righteousness, stay under His condemnation (Gen 6:3; John 3:36; Rom 1:18–19).¹² When sinners refuse to be justified, saved, delivered, and vindicated by God, then they are left on their own and condemned to death, because divine judgment is also condemnation, punishment, and destruction. We can, therefore, use the language of salvation to describe God's judging activity—to be saved or condemned.

To talk about judgment is a serious and solemn matter, because God is holy and a "consuming fire" (Exod 3:5; Deut 4:24; Isa 6:3; 30:27, 30; Heb 12:29); but at the same time, it is a message full of hope, salvation, assurance, and joy (Ps 9:1–12; Rev 12:10–12). If God were not the Judge of the Universe, we would never have assurance of the eradication of sin, evil, the wicked, fallen angels, and Satan. Cemeteries, hospitals, and prisons would be here till the pre-

promises a Seed; 2) in the Flood account, wickedness is condemned and destroyed, but Noah is saved (the whole focus is on God's grace and remembrance of Noah); 3) in the story of the tower of Babel, people are dispersed, but God chooses to continue His plans through Abraham, etc. Regarding the positive aspect of the judgment in reconciliation and justification, see Hans K. LaRondelle, *Christ our Salvation: What God Does for Us and in Us* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1980); idem, *Assurance of Salvation* (Nampa: Pacific Press, 1999); Edward Heppenstall, *Salvation Unlimited* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1974).

⁹See, F. Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996), 192, 936, 1047; William L. Holladay, ed., *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 70, 338, 380. Hebrew language employs three key words for judgment—*mishpat*, *dîn*, and *rib*; and the New Testament works with three basic terms for judgment as well—*krîsis*, *krîno*, and *krîma*.

¹⁰Every time sinners are justified, when they are declared right before God, they are passing through divine judgment (Rom 3:21–26). The whole biblical book of Judges demonstrates that the role of judges is positive: to deliver the people of God from their enemies, protect, care for, vindicate. See also Ps 37:38–39.

¹¹The Bible translation I use in this article is the New International Version.

¹²To judge in the sense of to condemn, punish, and/or destroy is a secondary meaning of this word. However, in some passages of the Bible, this meaning of condemnation is stressed and has a primary function (e.g., Ps 143:2; John 5:29; Rom 2:16; Heb 13:4).

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cious gift of life would be extinguished, because sin brings death, suffering, and violence. However, God is the Judge and the Victor (Ps 7:11; John 16:33; Rev 3:21); thus He brings an end to evil, and the salvation and life of His faithful followers is secured for all eternity. Actually, there is no Gospel without judgment. Everyone must be judged by the Gospel of Jesus (Rom 2:14), and without any exception all people have to appear before the judgment seat of God, as Paul asserts (2 Cor 5:10). Judgment is an integral part of the eternal Gospel (Rev 14:6–13).

It is my deep conviction that we need to develop a new pattern regarding God's universal judgment. This new approach will help us to perceive in a more consistent and comprehensive way how God deals with sin and how He saves sinners. For a long time our Adventist theology has not put enough emphasis upon the cross of Jesus Christ as the center of all of God's judgments,¹³ even though Adventist authors have taught the importance of the cross of Jesus along with salvation in Christ. However, the cross has often not been presented in direct connection with God's eschatological judgment, but rather separately, detached.¹⁴ The victory of Jesus in the drama of the cross has frequently not been seen as playing a dominant role in the context of God's eschatological judgment. It is particularly true in regard to the three final eschatological phases of God's

¹³See, for example, Gerhard F. Hasel, "Divine Judgment," *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 2000), 815–856; Mark Finley, *Studying Together: A Ready-reference Bible Handbook*, rev. ed. (Fallbrook: Hart Research Center, 1995), 21–22; Richard Rice, *Reign of God: An Introduction to Christian Theology from a Seventh-day Adventist Perspective*, 2nd ed. (Berrien Springs: Andrews UP, 1997), 328–346.

One may detect two extremes in Christian literature: either everything in relationship to judgment was done and accomplished on the cross, or God's eschatological judgments are put too far from the perspective of the cross. These one-sided positions fail to do justice to the total picture of biblical teaching.

¹⁴It is necessary to stress that the cruciality of salvation in Jesus accomplished at the cross is a very dominant and significant concept in Adventist theology. Jesus Christ is seen as our Advocate or Intercessor at the judgment; but simplified presentations about the judgment confuse some, hindering their ability to grasp clearly the true meaning of the whole concept of judgment—namely, putting cross and judgment together.

For the beauty of the explanation of how we are saved in Jesus Christ at God's judgment, see, for example, LaRondelle, *Assurance of Salvation*, 93–101; Morris L. Venden, *Never Without an Intercessor: The Good News About the Judgment* (Boise: Pacific Press, 1996); Edward Heppenstall, *Our High Priest: Jesus Christ in the Heavenly Sanctuary* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1972), 33–76; Frank B. Holbrook, *The Atoning Priesthood of Jesus Christ* (Berrien Springs: Adventist Theological Society Publications, 1996); Ivan T. Blazen, "Justification and Judgment—3: Judgment and Assurance," *Adventist Review*, 4 August 1983, 5–6. See also two articles by Richard M. Davidson, "Assurance in the Judgment," *Adventist Review*, 7 January 1988, 18–20; idem, "The Good News of Yom Kippur," *JATS* 2/2 (1991): 4–27, who connects the cross with the pre-advent judgment.

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universal judgment that they have too often been isolated from the judgment at the cross.¹⁵

This unwitting and unintentional distancing of the cross and the pre-advent judgment (the ultimate event in popular Adventist thinking for the determination of people's eternal destiny) is the cause of frustration for many sincere Adventist Christians. This disconnection is for them almost like a divorce from Jesus when they think they have to make it through the judgment on their own. They may think that in the judgment they stand "naked" and alone before God's magnifying glass when they go through the x-ray of the light of His perfect law and His holiness. The distance between eschatology and the cross may lead to wrong impressions, may provide false patterns for thinking, and may even rob an honest student of the Bible of the assurance and joy of salvation. God's character is in this way distorted and twisted. The result is that many are scared of God, afraid of His judgment, and live in spiritual schizophrenia.

To launch the exposition of God's eschatological judgments with the pre-advent judgment is a narrow approach and may mislead, because according to the Bible, **eschatological** time was inaugurated with the first coming of Jesus Christ (Heb 1:1–2; 9:29; 1 Pet 1:20; 4:7; Acts 2:17; 1 Cor 10:11; 2 Pet 3:3; 1 Tim 4:1; 1 Thess 4:16–17). The key factor in my approach is the fundamental recognition that the eschatological judgments start with the first coming of Christ when the last days were introduced and when Jesus Christ made atonement for sin and brought salvation and eternal justice (Isa 53:1–12; Dan 9:24, 27; John 1:29; 2 Cor 5:18–21; and also prefigured in the daily sanctuary ceremonies which culminated in the Day of Atonement). We always need to have in our minds that biblical eschatology has a double focus: the first and second coming of Jesus Christ.¹⁶ However, Christ's first advent is the fundamental basis for His second coming. The eschatological judgments center in the cross because the first coming of Christ installs the "last days," and with the incarnation the last aeon arrived. There are numerous texts that prove this crucial point (see above). All biblical teachings point and converge at the cross, and from the cross all doctrine springs up and is further elaborated and developed.¹⁷ The cross of

¹⁵These three phases of God's eschatological judgment will be discussed below: 1) pre-advent judgment; 2) judgment during the millennium which takes place after the second coming of Christ; and 3) the last judgment which will be executed at the end of millennium.

¹⁶George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), idem, *The Last Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 47–48; Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time*, rev. ed., trans. Floyd V. Filson (London: SCM, 1962).

¹⁷In Adventist theology this point was made very clear by Ellen G. White when she wrote: "The sacrifice of Christ as an atonement for sin is the great truth around which all other truths cluster. In order to be rightly understood and appreciated, every truth in the Word of God, from Genesis to Revelation, must be studied in the light that streams from the cross of Calvary. I present before you the great, grand monument of mercy and regeneration, salvation and redemption—the Son of God uplifted on the cross. This is to be the foundation of every discourse given by our ministers" (*Gospel Workers* [Washington: Review and Herald, 1915], 315). And again: "Of all professing

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Jesus Christ is the central truth of all doctrine! It means that the cross also has to be central for the biblical doctrine of judgment.

The purpose of this article is to suggest a fresh, holistic, and comprehensive theology of God's judgment in light of the cross of Jesus purposely standing at the center of divine judging activities. All aspects of God's universal judgment are tied together from the perspective of the cross. In this article I do not deal so much with the exegetical details of God's judgments,¹⁸ but rather with the overall picture and theology. This interpretation of the panorama of divine judgment in all phases, but especially the pre-advent judgment, is written from the perspective of a person who has heard the good news about God, given his/her life to Jesus, unconditionally accepted His amazing grace, and actively lives the experience of salvation in Christ.

Theologically speaking, there is only one judgment of God—the universal judgment, which is like an umbrella over all judgments that God executes. However, this universal judgment has different phases. I argue for seven phases of God's universal judgment: one pre-eschatological and six eschatological. All are explained from the perspective of time (history) and nature (content) and are centered in the cross.¹⁹

Christians, Seventh-day Adventists should be foremost in uplifting Christ before the world" (*Gospel Workers*, 156). See also *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1956), 5:1137–1138; Ellen G. White, *Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1911), 560.

¹⁸My basic presupposition is that theology must be always built on solid exegesis. In this study I have built on many insightful and pertinent theological and exegetical works, such as: Hasel, "Divine Judgment," 815–856; William H. Shea, *Selected Studies on Prophetic Interpretation*, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series, vol. 1 (Washington: Review and Herald, 1982); idem, *Daniel 1–7: Prophecy as History*, The Abundant Life Bible Amplifier Series (Boise: Pacific Press, 1996); idem, *Daniel 7–12: Prophecies of the End Time*, The Abundant Life Bible Amplifier Series (Boise: Pacific Press, 1996); Jacques B. Doukhan, *Daniel: The Vision of the End* (Berrien Springs: Andrews UP, 1987); idem, *Secrets of Daniel: Wisdom and Dreams of a Jewish Prince in Exile* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 2000); Jon Paulien, *What the Bible Says About the End-Time* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 1994); Frank B. Holbrook, ed., *Symposium on Daniel*, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series, vol. 2 (Washington: General Conference Biblical Research Institute, 1986); idem, *70 Weeks, Leviticus, Nature of Prophecy*, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series, vol. 3 (Washington: General Conference Biblical Research Institute, 1986); idem, *Symposium on Revelation-Book II*, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series, vol. 7 (Washington: General Conference Biblical Research Institute, 1986); idem, *The Sanctuary and the Atonement: Biblical, Theological, and Historical Studies*, abr. ed. (Silver Spring: General Conference Biblical Research Institute, 1989); C. Mervyn Maxwell, *God Cares: The Message of Daniel* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1981); idem, *God Cares: The Message of Revelation* (Boise: Pacific Press, 1985).

¹⁹See the overview chart at the end of this article.

I am indebted to Jon Paulien for some vocabulary in relation to the three judgments he mentions in his commentary on the Gospel according to John. He speaks about 1) judgment at the cross; 2) judgment in the preaching of the gospel; and 3) judgment at the end. It is interesting to observe that he does not call these judgments eschatological. See Jon Paulien, *John: Jesus Gives Life to a New Generation*, The Abundant Life Bible Amplifier (Boise: Pacific Press, 1995), 125–127.

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The cross of Jesus divides human history into three dispensations or epochs of time: the first one as the “pre-cross dispensation,” the second as the “cross dispensation,” and the third as the “post-cross dispensation.”²⁰ The cross is the pivotal, crucial, and irreplaceable dividing point. The pre-cross epoch may be described as pre-eschatological, and the second and third epochs together form an eschatological period of time.

First Phase: Pre-Cross Judgments

The first phase of God’s universal judgment consists of His interventions into human affairs before the first coming of Jesus Christ—into the life of an individual or a community. We need to remember that God’s judgments are eschatological in nature.²¹ When, for example, God intervenes in order to justify sinners, it means that the final judgment has broken into our existence and history,²² and He is declaring a repentant person right. This is true for the situation before or after the cross (Gen 15:6; Rom 4:1–4). In addition, these pre-cross divine judgments were interferences meant by God to stop the avalanche of sin in society (as in the case of the Flood of Gen 6–9 or the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah described in Gen 19). Here eschatological time penetrated into specific historical space and time.

These pre-cross judgments were **preliminary**, or **mini-judgments**,²³ and many of them were **typological** in nature.²⁴ The New Testament in the typological sense refers to the situations of people before the Flood (Matt 24:37–39; Luke 17:26–27) and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Luke 17:28–29) and announces the antitypical fulfillment in the world before the second coming of Christ—“as it was during Noah’s day, so will it be at the end when the Son of Man will return.”

Revelation 13:8 stresses that the focal and central point for the whole human salvific history is the cross of Jesus Christ, because He is “the Lamb that was slain from the creation [foundation] of the world.” The same is stressed by Paul: “For he chose us in him [Jesus Christ] before the creation of the world to

²⁰I do not use the term “dispensation” in the same sense as dispensationalists do; different dispensations do not represent different ways of salvation. The purpose of that distinction is to place the cross at the center of salvation history.

²¹The contradiction of this statement with the “pre-eschatological dispensation” of time is apparent, and may be explained only in the sense that the “pre-eschatological judgments” are pre-cross events, and in the strict biblical meaning that the cross of Jesus inaugurated the eschatological times.

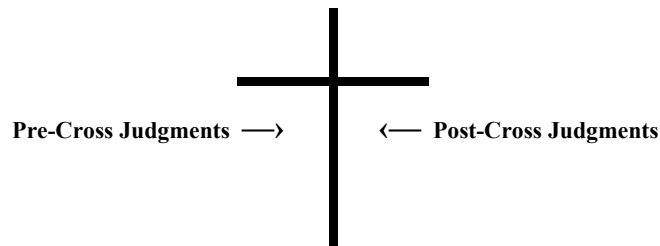
²²George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 441–443.

²³Thus Clifford Goldstein, *False Balances: The Truth About Judgment, the Sanctuary, and Your Salvation* (Boise: Pacific Press, 1992), 39–44.

²⁴Regarding typology and typological structures, see Richard M. Davidson, *Typology in Scripture: A Study of Hermeneutical Typos Structures* (Berrien Springs: Andrews UP, 1981); idem, “Typology and the Levitical System—1,” *Ministry*, February 1984, 16–19, 30; idem, “Typology and the Levitical System—2,” *Ministry*, April 1984, 10–13.

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be holy and blameless in his sight” (Eph 1:4).²⁵ This means that the cross is a symbol of grace, of God’s activity on our behalf from the very beginning of humanity.²⁶ Without that grace, the first couple in the Garden of Eden would have died after they sinned, because God plainly stated that “in the day” they eat from the forbidden fruit, they “will surely die” (Gen 2:16–17). But in view of God’s ultimate sacrifice on the cross, they were given grace, forgiven, and new life was offered. At the cross everything merges, and from it deeper insights spill out. From this view of the cross, I want to explore the theology of divine judgment in its seven phases. This is why I divide God’s judgments into pre- and post-cross.



There are multiple examples of the pre-cross phase of God’s judgments, because every time God saves or condemns, He is acting as a Judge.²⁷ All people saved in the Old Testament dispensation of time were saved only on the basis of God’s grace flowing from the cross and never on the basis of the law, obedience, or their own righteousness achieved through their good deeds (Gen 5:24; 6:8–9; 15:6; Deut 14:2; Ps 32:1–2; 51:8–10; Hab 2:4). The love and grace of God and faith in God were the integral parts of their transforming experience of salvation from the very beginning.²⁸

²⁵See also 1 Pet 1:20: “He [Christ, a Lamb without blemish and defect] was chosen before the creation of the world.”

²⁶The merits of the cross are anticipated in God’s salvific activity, they are taken as a reality, as though it had already taken place and salvation was accomplished. The certainty of the victory of Jesus on the cross is taken for granted. Some examples will suffice: in the Flood account, Noah received grace; after the Tower of Babel, Abraham was called to be God’s witness in this world; Moses was God’s instrument of salvation in a situation of judgment (Exod 32:30–32), etc. These judgments in history before Christ’s death are pre-eschatological only in the sense that with the first coming of Jesus eschatological time originated.

²⁷For example: the judgment of Adam and Eve after they sinned and were driven out of the Garden of Eden (Gen 3), the judgment upon Cain (Gen 4), the Flood (Gen 6–9), the building of the Tower of Babel (Gen 11), the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19), the ten plagues with judgment on Egyptian gods (Exod 7–12), the rebellion of Korah (Num 16), etc.

²⁸There are no two ways of salvation—one for the people living in the Old Testament dispensation of time and another for the repentant in the New Testament dispensation. There is only one Savior, Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow (Heb 13:8). In the Old Testament times people were saved in view of the cross (looking forward to this crucial yet future event), and in the New Testament they are saved in retrospective view of the cross (looking back to this historically accomplished saving act of God).

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There is no specific pattern in these pre-cross judgments that helps us discern how and why God specifically intervenes in human history. Not all the wicked were condemned or punished, and it seems that God chose to demonstrate in the cases of some people and events how He hates sin in order to give humans an important lesson about His righteousness, holiness, and love. These pre-cross judgments were very often pedagogic in nature, and their purpose was to stop the spread of sin.²⁹ In specific crucial situations, God chose to teach humans that evil will not go unpunished and that the righteous will be vindicated and receive their reward (Gen 5:24; 2 Kgs 2:11). These pre-cross judgments were usually mixed with mercy. For example, the judgment Flood story is first of all about God's grace to Noah and then about the condemnation of the wicked; pouring judgment on the builders of the Tower of Babel is recounted as a background for God's call of Abraham; judgment in Egypt culminates with the Exodus of God's people, etc. Thus, these judgments of God are both redemptive and punitive. Having these facts in mind, I call the nature of this first phase of God's judgment **the pedagogical or typological judgment**.

Second Phase: The Judgment on the Cross

The crucial phase of God's eschatological judgment originated with His judgment on the cross when Jesus Christ as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29) died for us (Rom 4:25; 1 Cor 15:3; Heb 7:27). On the cross, Jesus experienced the wrath of God over sin and the holy God's condemnation of sin (Gal 3:13; cf. John 3:36; Rom 1:18). By taking our sins upon Himself, Christ became sin in order that we might live and receive His righteousness (2 Cor 5:21). Thus, Jesus experienced God's objective judgment on sin and died the second death in place of sinners. In this way, the whole world was judged at the cross, because our sins killed Jesus (Isa 53:4-6; 1 Cor 15:3). We were condemned to death, but because of Jesus' sacrificial substitutionary death, "whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16; cf. 1:12; 3:36).³⁰

This pivotal stage of the cross is presented by Jesus Himself when He stated: "'Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself'" (John 12:31, 32). And again, "'In regard to judgment, because

²⁹The same principle is true and can be observed in the specific historical post-cross judgments. Suitable examples are Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11) and Herod (Acts 12:21-24).

³⁰About the meaning of the death of Jesus Christ as an atoning sacrifice and substitution, see especially Raoul Dederen, "Christ's Atoning Ministry on the Cross," *Ministry Insert*, January 1976, 3C-30C; Leon Morris, *Glory in the Cross: A Study in Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1966); idem, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965); idem, *The Atonement: Its Meaning and Significance* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1983); John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1986); Alister E. McGrath, *The Mystery of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988); H. D. McDonald, *The Atonement of the Death of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985).

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the prince of this world now stands condemned” (John 16:11). The cross was the fulfillment of the proto-Gospel of Gen 3:15 about the promised Seed who will crush the head of the serpent, Satan.³¹ Paul eloquently describes this triumphant victory over Satan, evil, and sin in Col 2:13–15 and Eph 4:8 (cf. Luke 10:18).³² Also, the book of Revelation speaks about this pivotal victory of Jesus (Rev 12:7–12). Thus, Satan was judged and defeated along with everyone who associates with the archenemy of God. God Himself was “judged,” i.e., vindicated, and it was proven that He is the God of love, truth, justice, and freedom.

The judgment on the cross is **the central judgment**, because the cross of Christ is the central point in human history, and at Calvary in the intense agony of suffering He fought for our salvation and secured it. In total humility and surrender to His Father, Christ won the victory. Even the safety of the whole universe depends on that key event, because the rebellion against the loving Lord started in heaven. The cross was and is a focal point of the whole universe; this is why we are today the spectacle for the inhabitants of heaven (1 Cor 4:9), and our fight of faith has a cosmic dimension (Eph 3:10; 6:12).

Witnesses of this judgment were multiple: the whole heaven, and upon the earth those who were present at the crucifixion of Jesus—Romans, Jews, Pilate, and Herod, who together conspired against Jesus (Acts 4:27). Everything in the universe depended on this crucial event of salvation history! Through Christ's death salvation was secured once and for all (Heb 9:26–28). It is no wonder that this ultimate event in history is so **central** and **cosmic** in scope. This is why I call this judgment **the central-cosmic judgment**. Jesus revealed who God is, that He is always on the side of the sufferer, because in our distress and suffering He suffered with us (Isa 63:9). Thus God proved that He is indeed love and just (Rom 1:17; 2:4; 1 John 4:16–17).

After this central and cosmic phase of divine judgment come five **post-cross judgments** which are eschatological in nature and are an outworking of the central cross judgment. Each one of them has a different role to play and is indispensable and irreplaceable in the story of redemption (see below for details).

Third Phase: The Judgment During our Lifetime

The judgment which occurs during our lifetime is a third phase of God's universal judgment, and it is at the same time the first post-cross eschatological judgment.³³ It happens every time we make our decision for or against God. This

³¹Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *The Messiah in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 36–42; Ojewole.

³²Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement* (New York: Macmillan, 1969).

³³I need to emphasize that this judgment was also experienced by people living before the cross (from Adam on), because they had to make their decisions for or against God. In this sense, this decisive judgment really belongs to both dispensations of time—post-cross as well as pre-cross. I put

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occurs when we react to the Gospel,³⁴ to the preaching of the Word of God. It means that this judgment depends on the decisions we make in relationship to Christ, to His deeds for us. For example, during a sermon in a worship service or during witnessing and Bible studies, God's judgment is in effect according to our response to the message heard. On these occasions, the judgment hour has arrived and is present. Jesus demonstrates this point very clearly: "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life" (John 5:24).³⁵ Once we believe, we receive eternal life as a gift! Thus, the nature of this judgment during our lifetime can be called **the decisive judgment**, because a personal decision of each individual to the proclamation of the Gospel is crucial. When personal decisions are made in relationship to God, this judgment occurs.

Key texts which describe this phase of God's judging activities can be found in such passages as John 5:22–24; 3:16–18, 36; 14:6; 16:8–11; Rom 5:1–2; 8:1–4, 31–39; Eph 2:4–10; 1 John 2:28; 4:17; Isa 53:11–12; and Dan 11:33–35; 12:3.

This judgment occurs positively when humans are justified by God, when they are forgiven. God justifies sinners who come to Him and confess their sins, renounce them, and decide to follow Him in humility and obedience, wanting to serve others unselfishly. In that moment, God declares a repentant sinner just. This means that the eschatological judgment breaks into the life of the believer. We are what we will become because God is looking upon us from the future perspective. By the transforming power of God's grace, we will be like Him! The amazing grace of God will gradually change us in order to reflect the character of God.

this kind of judgment after the cross only for pedagogical reasons in order to simplify the flow of different types of judgments from the perspective of the first coming of Christ. However, the principles are applicable to both periods of time.

³⁴By the Gospel I do not mean only a narrow understanding about the life and death of Jesus, even though it is the integral and central part of it, but Gospel in totality revealed in the totality of Scripture—God as our Creator, Judge, Redeemer, Law-giver, Lord, Intercessor, Friend, Re-Creator, etc. Gospel from the Creation and the Fall to the new creation, from the Gospel according to Moses to the Gospel according to the Apocalypse. Gospel is about God's true character and His doings revealed in each book of the Bible and to its best in the life, ministry, and death of Jesus Christ. He was the Living Gospel! But we can know Him only through the written Gospel of the whole Bible.

³⁵The phrase of Jesus: "Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned" (NIV) is also translated "he who hears my word and believes in him who sent me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment" (NKJV). Both translations are possible and correct. The Greek phrase used here, *krísin ouk érchetai*, is open to both renderings, and they both make good sense, but from a different angle. In the first case, Jesus' sentence means that the believer in Jesus will not be condemned at the divine judgment at the end of time (at the affirmative judgment) because such a person accepted Jesus' word and followed Him; in the second case, it means that such a person will have no part in the Last Judgment because he will be affirmed by Jesus as His at the affirmative judgment and will be resurrected at the second coming of Christ and live for ever! See below for more details.

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During our life, our response to Jesus is what determines the outcome of the judgment. We are free to make any decision we please, but we need to understand that upon this decision rests our eternal destiny. There is nothing God or anyone can do to change the outcome of our decisions. The real issues in this judgment are: What will I do with Jesus? Whom will I trust? What is my reaction to the Gospel? These decisions are done during a lifetime with consequences for all eternity: saved or condemned, faithful or unfaithful, good or evil. Nothing and no one can reverse our decisions or refute the passing of God's judgment!

All humanity, those who ask for forgiveness but also those who refuse to accept Jesus as their personal Savior, are the participants at this judgment. God is the primary witness, because this judgment has a more or less private character—it occurs between God and the believer. Of course, people living around the saved must notice the profound change in their lives, because the Gospel always has ethical dimensions.

The following simple illustration demonstrates what Christ means to the repentant person. We sinners are like a paper upon which are written all over our many sins. Jesus Christ is represented by a Bible. As sinners we have heard the good news about our God, and for the first time we are attracted to Him for His goodness, kindness, faithfulness, and love toward us. We see His beauty, holiness, grace, and tender care. We accept Him as our Creator and Savior; we respond to His grace. This is why we are coming to Him as we are. If we come to Him and confess our sins openly, sincerely, and honestly, "He is faithful and just" to forgive all our sins and "purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:7; Isa 1:17). He accepts us 100%, without any reservation, and we are in Christ, hidden in Him, as the paper can be placed inside the Bible and becomes totally hidden in the Bible. We are thus completely covered by the white robe of His righteousness. This means that His righteousness is our righteousness; His purity is our purity; His perfection is our perfection; His character is our character; and we are seen by God as if we had never sinned!³⁶ Moreover, when the heavenly Father looks upon us, He does not see us sinners, but His beloved son Jesus Christ! This is the perfect Gospel.

This "in Christ" motif is a dominant thought in Pauline writings. We have everything in Christ (see, for example, Rom 3:22; 6:11, 23; 8:31; 9:1; 12:5; 16:7, 9, 10; 1 Cor 1:2, 4, 30; 3:1; 4:10, 15; etc).³⁷ Salvation in Jesus is irreplaceable. Everything in our lives depends on our relationship to God and on what He

³⁶The best explanation of the miracle of forgiveness and salvation in God's judgment is found in the book *Steps to Christ* (Boise: Pacific Press, n.d., reprint 1892), written by Ellen Gould White: "If you give yourself to Him, and accept Him as your Saviour, then, sinful as your life may have been, for His sake you are accounted righteous. Christ's character stands in place of your character, and you are accepted before God just as if you had never sinned" (62).

³⁷See Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 58–62, 168–169, 232–233, 371–373.

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has done for us from Creation to the present. The marvelous deeds of God climax on the cross of Jesus. Our relationship to Jesus, therefore, decides our eternal destiny.

However, the good news does not stop here. God also gives to His followers eternal life. Those who believe in Jesus already *now* have (not merely *will* have) eternal life (John 3:16, 36; 11:25; 1 John 5:13)!

In addition, amazing grace is at the same time transforming grace. We are not only counted by God as being without any blemish or spot (Eph 5:27; Col 1:22; 1 Tim 6:14), perfectly covered by His blood, but the power of His Spirit and Word is changing us so that we can gradually reflect more and more His perfect character (Rom 8:4). We grow in Him as we daily walk with Him (Col 2:6; 1 John 2:6; 2 Pet 3:18). Jesus Christ came to save us from our sins (Matt 1:21) in order that sin might have no power in our lives (Rom 6:6). Consequently, we fight a good fight of faith (1 Tim 6:12). God's love leads us to make right decisions, and it is God who gives us the strength to actually do God's will, to live in harmony with the will of God. Not only is the imputed righteousness a gift from God, but also obedience (imparted righteousness).

The Gospel does not terminate here! The next marvelous thing God does with us is very well explained by Paul in Eph 2:1–10. As sinners we were dead in our trespasses and sins (v. 1), but because of God's great love and mercy for us (v. 4), when we accepted Jesus as our Savior, He resurrected us, made us alive with Christ (v. 5). And then comes the incredibly surprising news: "And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Jesus Christ" (v. 6)! When we are in Christ, we are already in heaven, seated with Him on the right side of the Father (Eph 1:20; compare Rev 3:21). It means that we not only have eternal life, but we are in heaven already, seated with God on His throne in the heavenly sanctuary.³⁸ We do not need to worry about our salvation or judgment, but walk and rejoice in it.

I have to confess that when I first understood this tremendous truth, I was not able to stay quiet and motionless behind my study desk. I was literally jumping and shouting for joy: "Glory, hallelujah, hosanna to God!" Every time I think about it, I praise and glorify our awesome God. The more I understand His love toward us, the more I stand in awe before Him, and I want to follow Him because He is so good. God's grace is more than amazing. It's a fantastic grace! When God saves, He saves perfectly. We are already with Him in heaven. It is only a matter of time until it will happen, because now we are there and see Him by faith, but after His second coming we will see Him face to face and stay with Him forever.

We need, of course, to understand the dynamics of biblical truth in healthy tension between "already" but "not yet." This paradox we live in faith, because we have "already" all of it (we live in the kingdom of grace), but in reality we

³⁸See also Heb 8:1–2; 4:26; 9:11–12; 6:19–20; 10:19–25; 12:22–24.

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need to wait for the second coming of Christ to encounter Him face to face, receive eternal life, and actually be seated with Him on the throne (Rev 3:21); His kingdom of glory is “not yet” here. Because God’s victory and His coming is so certain, therefore we already have everything in Him now!

We need to come to the throne of grace every day (Heb 4:16; 7:25; 10:19–23). Because we are saved by the grace of God in Jesus Christ through faith (Eph 2:8), this has ethical consequences; we are now “created in Christ to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (v. 10).

If God is so involved with us, who can separate us from such great love of God? Paul is certain that no one and nothing on earth or in the whole universe can separate us from that love (Rom 8:35–39). Let me stress that even sin cannot separate us from God, but only unconfessed sin, stubborn staying in sin, cherished sin will ultimately separate us from the love of God. Our wrong attitude kills whatever is valuable, beautiful, and good.

When we accept Jesus we are justified, and as a result there is no more condemnation against us (Rom 5:1, 9; 8:1, 33, 34; 1 Cor 6:11).³⁹ God’s grace works in the life of saved people. Grace is like a pregnancy—it works instantly, even though it is not visible immediately. It needs time to be visible, tangible. It is the same with God’s grace: it transforms, but time is required for the process. Justification is a creative power of God that brings new life. It is an existential process: it re-creates true life, with the final eschatological renewal and transformation starting in our time and space.

Jesus Christ declares that He is our Judge (John 5:22)! This does not contradict Dan 7:22, because the Aramaic text does not convey the idea that the Ancient of Days Himself is pronouncing judgment, but that the judgment was pronounced (Peil form of *yehib*; Peil is a passive conjugation) in favor of the saints of the Most High. The biblical text in Dan 7 is silent as to who pronounced the judgment. However, in the context, the best candidate for pronouncing the verdict is a heavenly and divine person (clouds are a symbol of the deity)⁴⁰—the Son of Man who is very intimately related to the saints of the Most High, active for them, and has the highest authority. He is presented at the center of the judgment vision. The heavenly Father is presiding over the judgment, but Jesus is actually the one pronouncing the verdict.

Although the Gospel that we sit in Jesus Christ already in heaven is so beautiful, this is not yet the end of the good news about our God as the Judge. He is the One who is also convening a judgment in heaven so that He can, in front of the whole universe, legally secure our place there forever. This leads us to the fourth needed and important phase of God’s judgment.

³⁹George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 441–3.

⁴⁰Richard M. Davidson, “Cloud, Cloud of the Lord,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 102–103.

Fourth Phase: The Pre-Advent Judgment

God does not need to convene the judgment in heaven in order to condemn people, because we are all sinners and thus condemned to death. If He is calling a court into session in heaven prior to His second coming,⁴¹ its primary purpose is to secure legally our place in the heavenly family for eternity. Jesus, as the true Witness, will proclaim in front of the whole universe at the heavenly tribunal that we are His, that His grace is sufficient for us, that He made us new persons, changed by the power of His grace! He wants to secure it legally, openly, and publicly, and also transparently to all inhabitants of the universe, so that no one during eternity will ever raise the question of something being done unfairly, secretly, and partially. Jesus makes it plain that the saved are trustworthy people, that they fit in heaven because God's amazing grace is a transforming grace that changes them. God wants us to be accepted into heaven without any doubts or question marks.

Phase number two of God's post-cross judgments is the pre-advent judgment described mainly in Dan 7:9–27; Matt 22:1–14; Rev 11:19; 14:7.⁴² This judgment is performed in heaven (Dan 7:9–10, 13–14) prior to the second coming of Christ when the rewards will be given. Seventh-day Adventists explain that this judgment started in 1844 according to the book of Daniel (Dan 7–9).⁴³

⁴¹The sequence of the events in Dan 7 is very clear: after the fourth kingdom (Rome) there is: 1) a persecution of the saints (7–8, 21, 23–25); 2) then judgment in heaven (9–12, 22a, 26); and 3) finally the kingdom of God (13–14, 22b, 27). This sequence is repeated three times in the same chapter!

⁴²Very often the judgments described in the New Testament do not make a clear distinction between the final phases of divine universal judgment. In some biblical passages regarding the judgment, these particular phases blend together and look like one event. Only through the deeper insight of the immediate context and often through the larger context of the scriptural revelation does the light shed on the details help the reader understand a more distinct time framework of the specific judgment.

In similar fashion, the Old Testament mentions the first and the second coming of Christ together in one passage without paying special attention to the reality that they are describing two events (e.g., Isa 11:1–9; 52:12–15). Consider this analogy: when looking into the constellation of Orion and seeing all of its stars from our earthly perspective, each star appears as if it is the same distance from us here on earth. However, although the stars look like they are on the same plane in the sky, if one uses a telescope to view Orion, one visualizes great distances in depth between the stars as well as dramatic variances in the distances between the different stars and the earth.

⁴³For the detailed exegetical and theological insights of the pre-advent judgment, see Hasel, "Divine Judgment," 833–846; Shea, *Daniel 7–12*, 85–166; Richard M. Davidson, "The Meaning of Nisdaq in Daniel 8:14," *JATS* 7/1 (Spring 1996): 107–119; Heppenstall, *Our High Priest*, 107–129; Norman Gullett, *Christ is Coming! A Christ-centered Approach to Last-Day Events* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 1998), 410–437.

It is important to differentiate between an eschatological time in general inaugurated by the first coming of Jesus and a specific prophetic time of the end starting in 1798 and 1844 according to the historicist school of prophetic interpretation (Dan 7–9). For the explanation of this prophetic eschatological time and the chronological aspect of the judgment, see especially the following studies: Shea, *Selected Studies on Prophetic Interpretation*, 67–171; Doukhan, *Secrets of Daniel*, 100–156; idem, *Daniel: The Vision of the End*, 11–44, 153; Richard M. Davidson, "In Confirmation

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We are judged by the standard of God's law, the Decalogue, which is the transcript of His character. Jesus Christ is a perfect living example and personification of this law (James 2:12–13; 1:25; Rom 2:13, 16; 3:21–26; Matt 16:27; John 8:46; 14:30)! He is there for us as our Judge, Advocate (defense attorney), and Intercessor; all at the same time (1 John 2:1). He presents our life in its entirety before the heavenly court as our true and faithful Witness, so we are not going through investigation there alone! We are not standing in front of the court, exposed and abandoned as the court administers its judgment. On the contrary, Jesus is there on our behalf.

In some misleading Christian paintings and pictures, the repentant sinner is portrayed as a lonely being in the middle of the courtroom with millions of angels as witnesses, while God is portrayed as the Judge of the event. Unfortunately, this wrong representation of the judgment does harm to the loving character of God. The correct interpretation of the situation should be portrayed in the following ways: the repentant sinner standing in the courtroom with Jesus by his side, being embraced by his or her Savior; or the sinner standing on the palm of the pierced hand of Jesus; or Jesus standing in the courtroom with the sinner drawn in His heart.

What was done heretofore more or less privately in the life of individuals in relationship between God and themselves is now publicly made known to the whole universe. God affirms His judgment of justification in front of the universe to show that the saved stayed in close relationship with Him (it is not enough to marry, but to stay married). Therefore, the nature of this judgment can be called **the affirmative or confirmatory judgment** that certifies, seals, and ratifies what was done during a person's lifetime. From the perspective of God and the believer, no investigation is going on. God knows those who belong to Him, what happened in the lives of believers, and what relationship they cultivated with Him during their lifetime. Believers cannot influence anything in that judgment. They are totally passive, because all decisions were made during their everyday life. Affirmative judgment is a confirmation of lifetime decisions!

Investigation at this judgment is going on only for the sake of the angels or inhabitants of the universe, because for their sake the books (records of lives) were opened (Dan 7:10). They need to clearly see that those people who will be admitted to heaven to live with them are new people. This is why Jesus Christ as the true Witness of our life decision, orientation, and attitudes—He who knows perfectly our relationship to Him—presents our case to the universe. This presentation will be God's revelation of His amazing grace and transforming power (rather than a display of our sins). The effects will be celebrated in the lives of the individual sinners. It will be a great "power-point" presentation of how He

of the Sanctuary Message," *JATS* 2/1 (1991): 93–114. See also a pertinent dissertation written by Gerhard Pfandl, *The Time of the End in the Book of Daniel*, Adventist Theological Society Dissertation Series, vol. 2 (Berrien Springs: Adventist Theological Society, 1992), 272, 314, 317.

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worked for us, in us, and through us! Nothing mysterious; no secret activity. It is a legal procedure of admission to heaven in front of the whole universe. It will be plainly revealed if we sincerely accepted God as our Creator and Savior and embraced His grace, or if we were only acting as “good” actors or actresses.

God’s love and justice is demonstrated when He accepts into the heavenly family those who repented and followed Him. God is proven just because Christ demonstrates the transformation of sinners by God’s grace, Word, and Spirit. This process started in their lives, developing through time.

The common name given by Adventists to the pre-advent judgment is the “investigative judgment,” but this designation perhaps does not best describe the overall nature of that judgment, because from the perspective of God and the saved no investigation is going on. God knows who are His, and the redeemed made their decisions for God, and they know if they are in the right relationship with Him or they cultivate or live in sin. This judgment is investigative only from the standpoint of the angels. This is why I want to coin a new name for this particular judgment, namely, **the affirmative judgment**, because God in front of the universe affirms or confirms the relationship established between Him and believers during their lives. Nothing mysterious, hidden, or esoteric is performed at this judgment. It is a revelatory judgment because Jesus personally reveals the ethical dynamics of the relationship between Him and His faithful children.⁴⁴

This judgment is like the final inspection of a house. Inspection comes after a long period of construction, and at the end comes the process of “sealing” or approving the work. Part of this affirmative judgment is a review of lives, a demonstration of life’s orientation and attitudes, and finally comes the confirmation of a judged person. The pre-advent judgment is thus the last legal procedure before the second coming of Jesus to make clear to the universe who at the second coming of Christ will be saved and who rejected.

All professing believers in God are judged, not only those who truly follow Him but also those who are opposing His people in the name of “their God.”⁴⁵ In a sense, God is also vindicated, as it is demonstrated that His previous approval of a believer was correct. In this affirmative judgment, God is vindicated in forgiving those who asked openly, sincerely, and honestly for forgiveness of their sins, trespasses, and mistakes.

⁴⁴Ivan T. Blazen, “Justification and Judgment,” in *70 Weeks, Leviticus, Nature of Prophecy*, ed. Frank B. Holbrook (Washington: General Conference Biblical Research Institute, 1986), 339–388; idem, “Justification and Judgment—1: Justification by Faith and Judgment According to Works,” *Adventist Review*, 28 July 1983, 4–6; idem, “Justification and Judgment—6: Pre-advent Judgment and John’s Judgment,” *Adventist Review*, 25 August 1983, 9–12; Heppenstall, *Our High Priest*, 131–140.

⁴⁵Dan 8–9 reveals that the little horn, the antichrist power which played God, tried to change God’s law, trampled down His truth, and persecuted God’s faithful followers, is judged and condemned to death (see Dan 7:11, 26, and Dan 8:25). For all the details of this phase of God’s judgment, see especially Hasel, “Divine Judgment,” 840–842.

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Let me be personal. I imagine the situation in heaven when my name will be called in this judgment in the following way: Jesus will stand right beside me and with one hand will embrace me and with another will present my case—fairly, objectively, without denying anything. I will be seen as a sinner, condemned. But He is not there in order to display my sins like in a shop window. He will, on the contrary, point first of all to His amazing transforming powerful grace, and in front of the whole universe He, as the true Witness of my entire life, will explain my attitude toward God, my inner motives, my thinking, my deeds, my orientation and direction of life. He will demonstrate it all. Jesus will testify that I made many mistakes, that I transgressed His holy law, but also that I repented, asked for forgiveness, and was changed by His grace. He will proclaim: “My blood is sufficient for the sinner Moskala, His orientation of life is on Me, his attitude toward me and other people is warm and unselfish, he is trustworthy, he is my good and faithful servant.” After such crystal clear testimony by Christ on my behalf, I imagine that in that very moment, the whole heavenly tribunal will jump up from their seats and will applaud God’s amazing grace (not me!). They will clap for joy and shout glory and hosanna to God. Then they will say: “Yes, we want that Moskala, the justified sinner, who was transformed by the grace of God, to live with us. If he would not be here with us, there would be an empty space here; we would miss him. We want to live with him for all eternity.” Thus my place in heaven is secured for eternity. If I am there, it is only because of Him, His love and grace for me!

Fifth Phase: The Judgment at the Second Coming of Christ

The second coming of Jesus Christ is presented in the Bible as an executive judgment when He comes to give, on the one hand, eternal life to those who follow Him, and, on the other hand, condemnation to those who said no to Him (Matt 16:27).⁴⁶

The second coming of Christ is an ultimate consummation of the biblical hope which is the hope of all hopes. Jesus Christ comes with the reward to bring redemption to all true believers of God (Rev 22:12). It is a final deliverance of God’s faithful children from this sinful world (Isa 25:9)! It is actually an execution of a decision taken first in our lives, and then confirmed at the affirmative judgment. When Jesus comes, it is clear who will be resurrected to eternal life and who will suffer eternal condemnation and ultimate death. It is a condemnation and execution of the living wicked people (2 Thess 1:6–10; 2:8). This judgment at the second coming of Christ is therefore **the realization judgment**.

⁴⁶There are many pertinent studies about the second coming of Christ. See especially, Millard J. Erickson: *Christian Theology*, unabridged ed., 3 volumes in one (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983–5), 1185–1204; V. Norskov Olsen, ed., *The Advent Hope in Scripture and History* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1987); Sakae Kubo, *God Meets Man: A Theology of the Sabbath and Second Advent* (Nashville: Southern, 1978); Samuele Bacchiocchi, *The Advent Hope for Human Hopelessness* (Berrien Springs: Biblical Perspectives, 1986).

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At the second coming, all the living humans will be judged, but only the faithful believers will be saved. Also those who died in the Lord will be resurrected to eternal life (Job 19:25–27; Dan 12:2, 13; John 5:39–40, 44; 11:25–26; Rev 14:13)!

It is of high significance to stress that in all His judgments, God has taken our decisions, motives, thinking, orientation, attitudes, and behavior, and life very seriously. He never acts arbitrarily or capriciously, and He does not perform judgment partially or with favoritism. His judgments are fair, according to the truth. He never condemns before first attempting to save. The lake of fire was not prepared for humans, but only for the devil and his evil angels (Matt 25:41). Unfortunately, if a person refuses God's saving activity on his behalf (John 16:9), the individual must face the consequences of his or her decisions—condemnation and eternal death.

God is good all the time, even when He is executing judgment. He has no delight in the death of the wicked (Ezek 18:32, 33:11). To destroy is a very strange act for God (Isa 28:21). But, as in the case of the biblical Flood (Gen 6:11–13), so Jesus at His second coming will come to destroy those who destroyed the earth (Rev. 11:18), because wicked people became a destroying force, agents against life. God is always pro-life oriented, and as a great Surgeon he has to come and remove the cancer from humanity and the whole universe so the original, beautiful, abounding life may continue. He comes to destroy what was already destroyed by human corruption, sin, evil, selfishness, stubbornness, indifference, and pride. True meaningful life can only be experienced where there is love, truth, justice, order, respect, creativity, sacrifice, and service.

If someone will be condemned to death, it is not because that person is a sinner, but because that individual did not accept Jesus Christ as the solution to his/her sins, because that person refused to surrender to the influence of the Holy Spirit and the authority of His Word. The only solution for the problem of sin is Jesus Christ. Some will remain in sin, refusing divine help and the offer of salvation. There is no hope for such stubborn, evil, indifferent, selfish, and/or prideful people (John 16:9).

Sixth Phase: The Judgment During the Millennium

This phase of God's eschatological judgment takes place during the millennium.⁴⁷ The redeemed people will be taken to heaven at the second coming of Christ, while the wicked will die because of the brightness of the presence of

⁴⁷About different views on the millennium, see Hans K. LaRondelle, "The One Thousand Years of Revelation 20," *Ministry* (September 1982), 12–16; idem, "The Millennium: Its Old Testament Roots," *Ministry* (November 1982), 10–12; idem, "The Millennium: A Revelation of God's Character," *Ministry* (January 1983), 7–9; Robert G. Clouse, ed., *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1979); Millard J. Erickson, *Contemporary Options in Eschatology: A Study of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977); Stanley J. Grenz, *The Millennium Maze* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992).

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Jesus (2 Thess 1:6–10; 2 Thess 2:8; Rev 19:21). The key biblical passage describing this judgment is found in Rev 20:1–6.⁴⁸

What is the purpose of this judgment? We do not have much in the biblical text itself about this judgment; therefore we need to deduce things from the larger context. God wants all His people to be happy throughout all eternity despite the fact that somebody beloved by the saved will not be present. God opens to the redeemed all His inner thoughts and decisions and explains to them what He was doing to save those who will eternally perish, and He will unmask their inner reactions, thoughts, feelings, and motivations. God will take time to explain to the saved what they were really doing and how they were thinking and feeling.

This judgment will be an endorsement of God's previous decisions taken during the lifetime of the wicked and publicly displayed in heaven during the affirmative judgment. What was confirmed previously in heaven in front of the heavenly inhabitants during the affirmative judgment is now displayed to the redeemed. Everybody will understand why God had to decide negatively in their cases, because God's decision in regard to their lives was built on their negative attitude toward God. The cross, the ultimate revelation of God's love and the only solution to their wickedness, was rejected by these people!

To the redeemed, learning why God could not admit the unrepentant to heaven and to the New Jerusalem comes as a deeper revelation of His love and justice. They understand that He could not forgive those who did not ask for forgiveness or asked for it hypocritically. God demonstrates that these people rejected His saving grace that leads to good works and obedience (Gal 5:6; Matt 7:21–23; 1 Cor 7:19).

All the redeemed attest to God's goodness, love, and justice, despite their beloved human fellows being condemned to eternal death. The nature of this judgment can be characterized as **the attestation judgment** when all of the redeemed attest to God's justice and love in His decision not to admit to heaven those who did not surrender their lives to God,⁴⁹ refused His saving activity for them, and continued in their destructive behavior. They will also judge the evil angels and Satan (Rev 20:4; 1 Cor 6:2–3; Matt 19:28). The book of Revelation tells little about this judging activity of the redeemed during the millennium.

⁴⁸For deeper exegetical insights into this biblical passage, see Peter M. van Bemmelen, "The Millennium and the Judgment," *JATS* 8/1–2 (1997): 150–160; Joel Badina, "The Millennium," in *Symposium on Revelation-Book II*, ed. Frank B. Holbrook (Silver Spring: General Conference Biblical Research Institute, 1992), 225–242; C. Mervyn Maxwell, *God Cares: The Message of Revelation*, 494–500; Stefanovic, 561–567; Gulley, 438–457; Ekkehardt Mueller, "Microstructural Analysis of Revelation 20," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 37/2 (1999): 227–255.

⁴⁹For how people are saved at the judgment, see Clifford Goldstein, *Graffiti in the Holy of Holies* (Nampa: Pacific Press, 2003), 115–142; Morris Venden, *Good News and Bad News About the Judgment* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1982); Gulley, 458–461; LaRondelle, *Assurance of Salvation*.

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The millennium is also the time for healing and reconciliation. Imagine the situation when the Prophet Isaiah will meet King Manasseh who killed him; or what about the meeting between David and Uriah, whose wife David took and whose murder he ordered?

In this attestive judgment God is vindicated, for He did not forgive those who did not ask for forgiveness. They identified themselves with sin, and in their pride refused to humble themselves and ask Jesus to change them. In their stubbornness or indifference they rebelled against God. All the redeemed will now be able to see what God was doing for all the people whose fate is eternal death. God makes no mistakes. He did not forget even the least one who gave his/her life to Him. Only those who stayed outside need reap their consequences.

Seventh Phase: The Last Judgment

In Adventist theology, the cross is intimately connected with the last judgment.⁵⁰ In this final judgment on earth at the end of the millennium when the wicked will be resurrected, they will gather to attack God and His people in the New Jerusalem (Rev 20:7–10; 21:1–3), and the cross of Jesus will be elevated above the throne of God. God Himself is seated on the great white throne, and He judges all unrepentant creatures (Rev 20:11–12).⁵¹ In the light of the cross, the history of sin and salvation will be displayed—each stage of the rebellion against God as well His wonderful plan of redemption from the beginning of the rebellion of Satan in heaven through the supreme sacrifice of Jesus on the cross to the final victory at the second coming will be shown. Also, all the wicked will see their lives in the light of the cross. They will see what God was doing for their salvation, how many chances they rejected, how they despised His grace in their pride and ignorance. Their stubbornness and indifference will be keenly unmasked, and they will see the true nature of their rebellion.

After that, Satan, all of the fallen angels, and all sinners will acknowledge that God is just in dealing with them. All will bow down before God and proclaim His righteousness and love (Phil 2:9–10; Rom 3:4; Rev 15:3–4). However, afterwards Satan will be angry at himself that he, under the clear evidence, admitted God's victory, and he will try to reverse his defeat. He will lead all sinners into a final desperate attack against the holy city. Their wicked character is thus proven and demonstrated once again. Even the best information about God, His character and actions, will not change these beings. They are wicked through and through. There is only one solution—destroy them. The fire from heaven will fall and will definitively do away with sin, evil, and rebellion (Rev

⁵⁰Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan: The Conflict of the Ages in the Christian Dispensation* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1950), 666.

⁵¹About the Final Judgment, see Stefanovic, 568–572; John Lawson, *Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury, 1980), 264–270; L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979, reprint), 728–735; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 1140–1157; Erickson, 1200–1241.

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20:9–10). This will be **the annihilative judgment**, the final eternal non-reversible death. For those who rejected Jesus as their Savior and stayed in this stubborn attitude, there is no hope. They only destroyed. God needs, therefore, out of love, to destroy those destroyers. The nature of this judgment is **the final execution**; it is thus **the executive judgment**. God has to react to the destructive behavior of unrepentant humans, evil angels, and the devil. If He did not react, evil would “triumph” and life would be jeopardized and ultimately annihilated. God is presented as the Surgeon. Sin, sinners, and the devil with his angels are wiped out and the earth is purged of evil (Rev 20:13–15).

After cutting off what was sick and sinful without possible healing, He acts as Re-Creator of life. The last judgment will totally undo the damage of sin. He will create the New Heavens and the New Earth (Rev 21–22).⁵² Salvation and life will be secured for all eternity. Sin will never occur again! All intelligent beings in the universe will serve God faithfully out of love and gratitude because they know the goodness, love, justice, and truth of God.

This final phase of God's universal judgment is really universal. All are there: it is a cosmic audience with all the inhabitants of heaven and all the redeemed witnessing that the wicked of all generations, all fallen angels, and Satan are judged, condemned, and executed. Thus God will finally destroy all spots of sin and evil. And love, peace, harmony, joy, justice, freedom, order, and truth will reign for all eternity. God as the Lord of lords and God of gods will be worshiped forever and ever by everyone.

God is vindicated, for all see that He is the God of love and justice (Rev 19:2–3); consequently, He can now destroy those who rebelled against Him. God never destroys because someone is turning against Him, because that somebody unplugged himself or herself from Him. He is not like a crazy young man who would say to the girlfriend he “loves” but who refuses to love him: “Love me or I will kill you.” God destroys only destroyers of life. He does not punish us for the fact that we say no to Him, but for the reality of life—because when someone turns away from God, that person becomes a destroyer of everything that is valuable, beautiful, positive, and good.

Biblical judgment is not anthropocentric, but theocentric. It is not first of all about us and our salvation, but a self-revelation of God, of who He is! He was accused in front of the universe of injustice, wrongdoing. But by his open way of government He clearly demonstrates that He is a God of love and justice. He does not favor anyone; He is not arbitrary, but gracious with respect of the truth. His judgments are open so that everybody can see the beauty of His decision, His fair treatment of each individual, of sin, and of the perversion of those who associate themselves with evil and deliberately stay in sin.

The beauty of God's good news about judgment attracts humans to God! The theology of God's judgment is the ultimate revelation and demonstration of

⁵²Grudem, 1158–1167; Stefanovic, 573–613.

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the love, truth, and justice of God (Rev 15:2–4; Phil 2:10–11; Rom 3:4; Ps 51:4). God’s government is open; God’s ways are demonstrated and proved right and just. God is just while justifying sinners who accepted Him and trust Him as their personal Savior. It is a deeper revelation of God’s character in how He deals with the problem of sin, sinners, Satan, and fallen angels, and how He saves those who cultivate faith in Him! Salvation is secured and the safety of the whole universe is ensured for eternity.

God is never judged in the sense that He is called to a trial, because no one has the power to summon Him to court, and there is no standard outside of God by which He can be judged (see the excellent insights by Edward Zinke in E. Edward Zinke and Roland R. Hegstad, *The Certainty of the Second Coming* [Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 2000], 81-89.) Rather, He demonstrates the beauty and consistency of His own character. He himself in His love opens all that He is doing and invites others to see His judgments for themselves in order that all can be convinced by the evidence of His way of treating sin, sinners, fallen angels, and Satan that everything points to a God of love, justice, peace, truth, order, and freedom. This is why all the inhabitants of heaven will happily serve God throughout eternity, and no intelligent being will ever again think to revolt against such an awesome God. God will now recreate everything that sin damaged. The pattern is clear: creation, de-creation, re-creation.

God’s government is an open government; He hides nothing. He desires that the intelligent beings in the whole universe deliberately follow Him because they know Him for who He is. They love Him because they can trust Him.

In summary, the Gospel according to divine judgment is perfect as seen from the perspective of a genuine believer in Jesus:

1) God gives us educational lessons in “mini-judgments” from the past that we may know that He is truly the God of grace, love, justice, truth, and order and the Guarantor of freedom, that He loves people but hates sin, that we are responsible for our actions, and that there are consequences (pedagogical/typological judgment);

2) Then, Jesus Christ died for us, took upon Himself our sins, and experienced the judgment of condemnation that we may live and never be condemned to the second death (central-cosmic judgment at the cross);

3) Jesus applies what He accomplished at the cross to our present experience; He justifies and changes us by His amazing grace, Word, and Spirit; He gives us eternal life, His peace, joy, and full assurance of salvation, and He sets us with Him in heaven on His throne (decisive judgment during our lifetime);

4) Jesus as our true Witness and Intercessor secures legally, openly, and transparently our place in heaven by affirming in front of the universe that we have truly accepted His righteousness (justification is the basis of salvation), cultivated our relationship with Him, and consequently, that we are fit (sanctification is the fruit of salvation)—by His transforming grace, Word, and

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Spirit—to be admitted into the heavenly family in order to enjoy life throughout eternity (pre-advent affirmative judgment);

5) Jesus Christ comes personally to the earth for His faithful followers at His second coming in order to give them eternal life, to actualize for them tangibly and physically what they hoped for (realization judgment at the second coming of Christ);

6) Jesus Christ takes time to explain to the saved His decisions and thinking in order to help them to understand His judgments and cope with the eternal loss of their loved ones; He provides time for healing (attestation judgment during the millennium);

7) And finally, God Himself annihilates forever all evil—Satan, evil angels, the wicked, and sin—so that only love, peace, and harmony will reign, and He as Creator will recreate for His people the New Earth and New Heaven; thus true and meaningful life can be fully enjoyed and is secured eternally (the final executive judgment).

This universal judgment of God with seven phases makes perfect sense and cannot be made better. It is the perfect Gospel, because our God is a perfect God; He wants our best. All of this and more we have when we are in Christ! It gives the most beautiful picture of our loving, gracious, holy, just, and truthful God! He is the Victor; He is in control; He loves us more than we can comprehend. No one else is like Him. He is the Lord of lords and the King of kings. To Him alone belongs glory!

The biblical teaching about divine judgment is the Gospel, very good news about our incredible and marvelous God. Judgment is nothing one needs to be afraid of. It's not a stick to beat, threaten, or push us to be good and behave well. It is a message of hope and gives assurance of our salvation. It turns our sight from ourselves and focuses it on God. It presents a bright picture about God as our Judge Who is for us, always does His maximum to save us, delivers us from our enemies, and vindicates us in front of the whole universe. Judgment does not rob us of confidence but brings true joy of life. It presents the Judge of the Universe as our personal Creator, Savior, and Friend who wants our best, who does everything possible to secure salvation for us (John 14:1–3; 17:1–3). He lives and stands in heaven for us! “If God is for us, who can be against us” (Rom 8:31)?

With such good news about judgment, I cannot conclude differently than with a prayer: “Rise up, O God, Judge of the earth” (Ps 82:8)! “O righteous God, who searches minds and hearts, bring to an end the violence of the wicked and make the righteous secure” (Ps 7:9)!

“Let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,” declares the Lord” (Jer 10:24). Because we have so wonderful a God, we can have full assurance of salvation. The apostle John proclaims: “And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we

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may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming” (1 John 2:28), and again “Love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him” (1 John 4:17).

This is truly the Gospel according to divine judgment!

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