

## **The Gospel According to God's Judgment: Judgment as Salvation**

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When I introduce the topic of God's judgment, I regularly ask my audience: "What is your first reaction, thought, or feeling when you hear that God will judge you?" I have addressed this question on all continents (except Antarctica) to people of various political, social, religious, ethnic, educational, and age backgrounds, and the answer is always unanimous: "Fear!" In the past, I thought that it was mainly my problem, because I grew up in a totalitarian communist regime; and when I heard the word *judgment*, I immediately imagined a judge in dark clothing, with a severe expression on his face, pointing at someone with his finger, and condemning that person to death. However, I have found that everywhere people's impressions about the divine judgment are remarkably dark and extremely cold. They think that God is like a heavenly policeman waiting for their mistakes in order to punish them and perceive Him as a cosmic Nebuchadnezzar before whose sovereign authority nobody can escape. They feel that they are under the magnifying glass of the heavenly Judge, and thus are full of anxiety. The thought of coming under the judgment of God brings goose-bumps.

My distorted understanding was grossly influenced by some preachers who used divine judgment as a "pedagogical tool" to motivate believers to obedience, "encourage" them to be good, and behave nicely. They thought that scaring and threatening people with judgment would help them to

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follow God faithfully (contrary to Rom 2:4!).<sup>1</sup> They built their concept on a mistranslation of Jude 23: "Through fear lead others to salvation" (as some old translations have it),<sup>2</sup> and presented the divine judgment in full negativity. These interpretations were like beating me with an iron rod. This troubled me deeply; and from my childhood on, I had a bleak and unfriendly picture of judgment which played a dreadful role in my mind. As a result, I was afraid of God, frightened by Him, and naked before His expecting eyes. I felt lost, alone, and abandoned with an acute sense of guilt. I perceived nothing favorable in God's judgment.

Fear as a universal human reaction toward divine judgment is understandable, because we know that God is holy (Lev 11:44-45; 19:2; 1 Pet 1:15-16), a consuming fire (Isa 30:27), and we are sinners (Ps 51:5; Eccl 7:20; Jer 17:9; Rom 3:23; 1 John 1:8). Consequently, we cannot possibly stand before the awesome Judge of the whole Universe (Gen 18:25; Judg 11:27; 2 Tim 4:8).<sup>3</sup> Our typical response is aptly described by Asaph: "Who can stand before you . . . ? From heaven you pronounced judgment, and the land feared and was quiet" (Ps 76:7b-8a; see also Judg 13:22; Isa 6:3-5). At the bottom of our negative thoughts lies the conviction of our insufficiency and sinfulness.

According to popular understanding, to judge means to "condemn, punish, and destroy." This is why people are scared, full of anxiety, and try to avoid even talking about it. When people equate God's judgment with condemnation, punishment, and destruction (and such meaning can clearly

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<sup>1</sup> "Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance" (Rom 2:4)? Biblical quotations are from the NIV unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> For example, the Kralicka Bible (Czech translation from the year 1613) and the Russian translation of 1876 translate it thus. Similarly, another mistranslation reads: ". . . others save with fear" (KJV and NKJV). The proper translation of this verse should read: "Save others, snatching them out of the fire; and on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh" (NASB).

<sup>3</sup> God's authority to judge is rooted in the fact that He is the Creator. Steven J. Keillor well argues: "Several Old Testament passages present God's assertion that his act of creation gives him the right of judgment after the Fall" (*God's Judgments: Interpreting History and the Christian Faith* [Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academics, 2007], 65). James M. Hamilton aptly states: "Creation provides the cosmic matrix within which God will display his glory in salvation through judgement" ("The Glory of God in Salvation Through Judgment: The Center of Biblical Theology?" *Tyndale Bulletin* 57, no. 1 [2006]: 81).

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be attested to in the Bible),<sup>4</sup> no wonder they do not experience joy and assurance of salvation in Christ Jesus. This threat of divine judgment robs them of thankfulness, and their world is divided between the redemption secured on the cross and the fear of God's judgment. Thus, they live in a spiritual schizophrenia which is a serious problem. On the one hand, they know that they are saved in Jesus Christ, but on the other hand, they understand that there will be a judgment (Rom 14:10; 2 Cor 5:10; 2 Tim 4:1; Heb 9:27; 10:30). They do not know how to put these two realities together, and they lose peace and certitude. Are fear and hopelessness something which undividedly belong to the concept of judgment? Are uncertainty and soberness its necessary companions?

While carefully studying the Holy Scriptures, I had to unlearn this wrong imagery of God's judgment. These one-sided definitions and interpretations of divine judgment are the real problem. This process of new thinking about divine justice is not easy, because negativity tries to sneak back in. In this article I underscore a positive dimension of the divine judgment and its main role (without denying that there is also a negative, very sober, and tragic side of God's judgment, i.e., condemnation, punishment, and destruction, but only as a secondary meaning) by providing a rich sample of bright biblical examples.<sup>5</sup> I want to underline

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<sup>4</sup> Examples of negative judgment include Gen 3:23-24; 4:11-12; 6:13; 19:24-25; Exod 12:29-30; Ps 143:2; Ezek 7:1-4; 8:6; Dan 5:25-30; Mal 3:5; John 5:29; 2 Thess 1:6-7; 2:8; Heb 13:4; Rev 14:9-10; 19:19-21, etc. It is true that God's wrath is directed against sin, but stubborn sinners who associate with it experience it too (Prov 28:13; Ezek 18:23, 31-32; Mal 4:1; Matt 25:41-46; John 3:36; Rom 2:4-5; 1 Thess 1:10; 2 Thess 1:8-10). Staying in sin before the Holy God results in hopelessness and death (Rom 6:23; Gal 5:21).

<sup>5</sup> There is a consistent pattern to God's judgment with both positive and negative aspects even in the midst of transgression and the setting of condemnation. Consider, for example, the following divine judgments: (1) The fall of Adam and Eve: positive—God's grace intervened and Adam and Eve did not die immediately and God promised the coming of the Seed to overcome Satan; negative—condemnation of transgression, expulsion from the Garden of Eden, and actual death; (2) Cain after killing his brother Abel: positive—a sign of protection is given to him; negative—he became a fugitive; (3) The flood: positive—the salvation of Noah and his family; negative: the destruction of the antediluvian evil population/world; (4) The building of the tower of Babel: positive—Abraham is called to be God's messenger to the world; negative—the dispersion of people and confusion of languages; (5) Sodom and Gomorrah: positive—the salvation of Lot and his close family; negative—the destruction of the wicked cities, etc. As the examples show, positive judgments are intermingled with negative dimensions. It seems that only a few exceptional

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that for the biblical authors the divine judgment is something that is desired and to which they looked forward with great anticipation: "Raise up, O God, judge the earth" (Ps 82:6). Judgment plays a vital role in God's plan of salvation, and it is a central part of the eternal Gospel (Rom 2:16; Rev 14:6-7).<sup>6</sup> Hamilton powerfully reasons that "the center of biblical theology . . . is the glory of God in salvation through judgement."<sup>7</sup> If that is so, the basic question is, therefore, what is the primary meaning of God's judgment? Four answers are provided.

### 1. To Judge Means to Justify

According to biblical understanding, "to judge" means "to justify" which is a legal action with an awesome impact on our lives.<sup>8</sup> Every time we confess our sins and are forgiven, we pass through God's eschatological

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cases (like Lev 10:1-2; 2 Sam 6:6-7; 2 Kgs 2:23-24; Acts 5:3-11; 12:21-24) and the last judgment (Rev 20:7-10) are purely negative judgments (but the radical eradication of evil brings positive results). God saves repentant people but also punishes sin (Exod 20:5-6; 34:6-7). These two fundamental characteristics of God constitute an indissoluble, inseparable, and paradoxical unit.

<sup>6</sup> See my article "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)," *Journal of Adventist Theological Society* 15, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 138-165; Richard M. Davidson, "Assurance in the Judgment," *Adventist Review*, 7 January 1988, 18-20.

<sup>7</sup> Hamilton, "The Glory of God," 59. J. Gordon McConville states: "The idea of God as judge is one of the most pervasive metaphors applied to God in the OT" ("The Judgment of God in the Old Testament," *Ex Auditu* 20 [2004]: 25).

<sup>8</sup> On the concept of judgment and its various vocabulary (*shapat, din, rib, paqad, tsadaq, yashab, anakrino, diakrino*, etc.), see Leon Morris, *The Biblical Doctrine of Judgment* (London: Tyndale Press, 1960), 7-43; McConville, 26-32; R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 1:188, 414-416; 2:731-732, 752-755, 845-846, 947-949; Ludwig Köhler, *Hebrew Man*, trans. Peter R. Ackroyd [London: SCM Press, 1956], 149-175; F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 192, 823-824, 841-843, 936, 1047-1049; C. U. Wolf, "Judge," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1985), 2:1012-1013; Merrill C. Tenney, ed., *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 3:838-839; 3:860-863; J. C. Moyer, "Judging, Judge," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 2:1161-1162; Temba L. J. Mafico, *Yahweh's Emergence as "Judge" Among the Gods: A Study of the Hebrew Root shpt* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen Press, 2007).

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judgment which breaks through to our situation, and we are justified by His grace, i.e., declared just. Judgment is justification: God as a true Judge justifies repentant sinners (Rom 3:22-26; 5:6-11), and we are cleansed and acquitted from all guilt (Ps 51:1-2; Isa 6:7; Zech 3:4). He does that and can do it, because He is our heavenly Judge! In this way, for example, Abraham was judged by God and pronounced righteous because he believed in Him (Gen 15:6); and Joshua, the high priest, was proclaimed right (Zech 3:3-5). Isaiah boldly declares: “But in the Lord all the descendants of Israel will be found righteous and will exult” (45:25). In this way, to judge means “to cleanse” (Ps 51:7-10; Job 4:17; Isa 1:18; Dan 8:14),<sup>9</sup> and the justified sinners stand in a restored and right relationship with their Lord. This positive proclamation of God on our behalf gives full assurance of salvation, new courage to live, brings true peace, and jubilant joy into our lives.

David joyfully states: “Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him and in whose spirit there is no deceit” (Ps 32:1-2). This is why Paul unambiguously clarifies: “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1)! Jesus plainly assures: “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). The forgiven transgressor does not come into the judgment of condemnation and will not experience God’s disapproval.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, Paul announces that those who truly accept

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<sup>9</sup> David P. Wright renders the *hapax legomenon* Hebrew *nifal* verb *nitsdaq* of Dan 8:14 with “be purified” (David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* [New York: Doubleday, 1992] 6:729).

<sup>10</sup> The key phrase in this verse, “will not be condemned,” can be translated in a different way: “shall not come into judgment” (NKJV). The ambiguous Greek term *krisis* is intentionally used here with a double meaning in order to allude to two complementary terms (i.e., condemnation and judgment) which are both correct. Those who believe in Christ will not be condemned at any judgment (Rom 8:1; 14:10; 2 Cor 5:10), and they will not come to the last judgment of condemnation of the wicked because at that time the righteous will already be inhabitants of the New Jerusalem (see Rev 20:7-21:4).

Consider also the sequence of events in Jesus’ speech: (1) preaching of the Gospel: “hearing”; (2) positive response: “believing”; (3) results for the believer: (a) He/she has eternal life (note the present tense)! (b) He/she does not come to judgment (is not condemned)! (c) He/she passes from death to eternal life!

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Jesus as their personal Savior are raised to new life and are already sitting on the heavenly throne in Christ at the right side of the heavenly Father (Eph 2:6; 1:20)!<sup>11</sup> Thus, if we are already there, why are we so worried if we will make it into heaven one day?! Not one of our performances (however noble), great achievements, or good deeds can help us get into the kingdom of glory.<sup>12</sup> We receive salvation as a pure gift only through and in Christ!<sup>13</sup> No wonder authority was given to Him to pronounce judgment (John 3:17-18; 5:22-23, 27, 30; 6:37-40, 44; 8:16; 9:39; compare with Dan 7:13-14), and all glory belongs to Him (Ps 34:2; Jer 9:23-24; 1 Cor 1:29-31; 10:31; Col 1:27; Jude 24-25; Rev 5:12-13).

Additional examples are plentiful and portray this reality in various episodes in the Bible. The first judgment recorded in the Bible is over Adam and Eve after they broke their love and trust relationship with their Creator and ate the forbidden fruit (Gen 3:6).<sup>14</sup> Instead of being destroyed as God initially said—"In the day you will eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil which is in the middle of the garden, you will surely die" (Gen 2:17)—by God's grace their lives were spared, and He even looked for them (Gen 3:9). God's call "Where are you?" was an expression of His deep love in search of humanity and revealed God's judgment and grace at the same time. On account of the grace coming from the Lamb, who was slain before the creation of the world (Rev 13:8; 1 Pet 1:20; Eph 1:4), they were given life. The protogospel announced God's love for sinners because only He could provide a solution for our lost sinful

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<sup>11</sup> This reality is accepted and lived only by faith. This "already" is balanced with "not yet." We need to wait till the Second Coming of Jesus in order to see Jesus face to face, receive our reward, and be physically with Him in His kingdom (Matt 16:27; John 11:25; Rom 8:24; 1 Cor 13:12; 15:51-55; 2 Cor 5:7; Phil 3:20-21).

<sup>12</sup> Good work has a threefold crucial function: (1) it is not important not for our salvation but for the salvation of others (Matt 5:16; Rom 10:14; Gal 5:6; Eph 2:10; 1 Pet 2:9); (2) it demonstrates that our faith is alive because without works our faith is dead (James 2:26); (3) it reveals our salvation which is a 100% gift from God (John 14:15; 1 John 4:19).

<sup>13</sup> Ellen G. White put it eloquently: "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 as if you had not sinned" (*Steps to Christ* [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1892, 1893], 62).

<sup>14</sup> Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, A Continental Commentary (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), 252-255.

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situation and defeat Satan (Gen 3:15).<sup>15</sup> When we are in Christ, we are sons and daughters of God and heirs of His kingdom. In Christ we have everything (Gal 3:29; 4:7; Rom 4:13-16; 8:32; 1 John 3:1), and we can entirely wrap ourselves in His divine forgiveness.<sup>16</sup>

George Ladd correctly explains: “The doctrine of justification means that God has pronounced the eschatological verdict of acquittal over the man of faith in the present, in advance of the final judgment. . . . Thus the man in Christ is actually righteous, not ethically but forensically, in terms of his relationship to God.”<sup>17</sup> God is just (Deut 32:4; Ps 31:5; 2 Chr 15:3; 2 Thess 1:6; 1 John 1:9); He never perverts His judgment or can be accused of favoritism (Prov 17:15; Acts 10:34-35; Eph 6:9; Col 3:25). He is just while justifying sinners (Rom 3:26; Rev 16:7), because He changes them. God sees in the present what we will become by the power of the Holy Spirit, His mighty word, and His blazing grace. He declares us righteous, because by His amazing grace we will be righteous, our lives will be transformed.<sup>18</sup> We are new creatures in Christ and His grace will grow in us (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15; 1 Cor 3:7; 2 Cor 10:15; Eph 4:13-15; Col 2:19; 1 Pet 2:2; 2 Pet 3:18). Grace is amazing because it changes people and does what we cannot accomplish for ourselves (Rom 7:14-18; Jer 13:23; Isa 64:6; Matt 11:28-30; John 1:12; 3:7; Acts 4:12; Eph 2:4-5; Rom 8:10-11; 1 John 3:1-6). When we pass through God’s acquittal, He justifies us as our Judge and in His eyes we are what we will be.

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<sup>15</sup> Afolarin Olutunde Ojewole, “The Seed in Genesis 3:15: An Exegetical and Intertextual Study” (Ph.D. diss., Andrews University, 2003).

<sup>16</sup> Peter Brunner, “The Forgiveness of God and the Judgment of God,” *Word & World* 21, no. 3 (2001): 288. On the importance of forgiveness, see Donald E. Gowan, *The Bible on Forgiveness* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publication, 2010); McConville, 32-38.

<sup>17</sup> George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 446.

<sup>18</sup> God’s grace is amazing not only because a sinner like me can be saved, but because His grace is transforming. If His grace were not transforming, then it would not be amazing.

We are changed by beholding Jesus (2 Cor 3:18; Col 3:1-4, 10; Heb 12:2; Phil 2:13), and by the power of His Word and Spirit (Ps 33:6; Ezek 36:26-28; John 3:5; Titus 3:5; 1 Pet 1:23; Jas 1:18).

## 2. To Judge Means to Save

God saves believers from the second death,<sup>19</sup> sin, guilt, the power of evil, and gives eternal life (John 1:12; 3:16; 10:28; Rom 6:5-9, 23; 8:1-4). King David first describes a negative aspect of divine judgment in terms of destruction and cutting off but then emphasizes judgment as salvation: "All sinners will be destroyed; the future of the wicked will be cut off. The salvation of the righteous comes from the Lord; he is their stronghold in time of trouble" (Ps 37:38-39). Asaph stresses that when God rises up to judge it means that He is coming "to save all the afflicted of the land" (Ps 76:9). Thus, these biblical texts explicitly state that for God to judge means to save His people! God's judgment is salvation<sup>20</sup> and comes uniquely from the Lord (Pss 62:1; 118:14; Isa 12:2; Jonah 2:9). God is the Savior and Redeemer (Deut 32:15; 2 Sam 22:3; Job 19:25; Pss 18:46; 19:14; 43:5; Isa 44:6; 48:17; 59:20; 63:8-9; Jer 14:8; Hos 13:4). The Hebrew word *yasha'* "denotes God's saving work in spite of a condemnation which is legally free from reproach."<sup>21</sup>

The biblical Flood account (Gen 6-9) is another good example of salvation in the midst of God's judging activity. The whole story is written in a chiasmic structure with its culmination statement: "But God remembered Noah" (Gen 8:1).<sup>22</sup> This climax does not mean that God had a lack of memory and suddenly He remembers, but that He intervened in

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<sup>19</sup> The first death is a natural death as a result of our sinful nature, but the second death is an eternal death as a consequence of our sinful life, and God's condemnation at His judgment (Rom 6:23; Rev 14:13; 20:6).

<sup>20</sup> "The Torah is a story of the glory of God in salvation through judgment" (James M. Hamilton, Jr., *God's Glory in Salvation Through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010], 67). Morris plainly states: "Judgment has a salvation aspect" (Morris, 18). Köhler argues on the basis of Isa 1:17 that "in Hebrew 'to judge' and 'to help' are parallel ideas" (156). O. Palmer Robertson correctly observes: "Judgment and salvation are closely linked in the theology of these prophets. Salvation for God's people comes directly in association with the judgment of God's enemies. . . . The salvation of God ultimately shall include Gentiles as well as Jews." (*The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990], 24). See especially Isa 18:7; 19:19-25; 56:1-8; Hos 3:4-5; Joel 3:1-16; Amos 9:7, 11-15; Mic 4:1-4; 7:7-13; Zeph 2:8-11; 3:8-10; Zech 2:10-13; 8:20-23.

<sup>21</sup> Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 7:977.

<sup>22</sup> William H. Shea, "The Structure of the Genesis Flood Narrative and Its Implications," *Origins* 6 (1979): 22-23.



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favor of Noah in the midst of judgment to save him and his family. Furthermore, Noah received grace from God (Gen 6:8). It is important to note that the term “grace” (*chen*) appears for the first time in the Bible in the Flood narrative. Surprisingly God’s intervening grace is the apex of the story, because from it all salvific actions flow for humanity.

God’s grace was not only for Noah, it was offered to the antediluvian people as well. Genesis 6:3 reveals that God’s Spirit was striving with people by calling them to repentance. However, God had to sadly proclaim: “My Spirit will not contend with man forever” (Gen 6:3). In this verse, the Hebrew word *din* “judge” appears, and translators are puzzled because they are not sure what to do with this concept. They do not try to hide the difficulty of this verse and propose various solutions.<sup>23</sup> In what sense was the Spirit of the Lord no longer able to “judge” them? God wanted to justify and save the antediluvian people, but because of their stubbornness, refusal to listen to His word, follow His instructions, and that their thinking was evil, He was unable to judge them favorably. Nevertheless, even in such an estranged situation, God gave them 120 years of additional grace so they could repent and turn back to Him (6:3b). Unfortunately, God’s amazing grace was not received graciously, and the result is described in language indicative of a total state of human depravity: “The Lord saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time” (Gen 6:5; see also 8:21). Noah was a preacher of righteousness to them (2 Pet 2:5), but his words and example of godliness were not taken seriously.

God had to stop the avalanche of evil, but He was waiting till the last second. When God intervened with His negative judgment, He actually intervened in His grace, because He could no longer envision the destruction, perversion, violence, torture, and exploitation of the pre-flood world. He destroyed what had already been destroyed by humans (Gen 6:11-13).<sup>24</sup> God, as the Surgeon, cut the cancer of sin out!

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<sup>23</sup> See BDB, 192; E. Kautzsch, ed., *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, trans. A. E. Cowley, 2d. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), 199. Compare different translations of this verse, e.g., NIV, ESV, and NKJV.

<sup>24</sup> In the Flood, God did not destroy something that was good, beautiful, meaningful, and had potential to grow. He put an end to human corruption and destruction. The author of the Flood narrative plays with the Hebrew word *shachat* which has a double meaning: (1) “destroy” and (2) “corrupt.” The wordplay in Gen 6:11–13 is striking (four times the word-

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Sadly, at the end, God was able to save only one family whose members were willing to cooperate with Him. If God had not intervened, the blight of sin would most probably in time have overrun even this faithful remnant. God's promised Seed would not have had a place to be born, His word would not have been fulfilled (Gen 3:15), and the Messiah's coming would have been hindered. Thus, the cancer of sin would have completely engulfed the world, evil would have won, Satan would have triumphed, God's cause would have been defeated and humanity lost! However, God's grace prevailed even in this tragic event (Rom 6:20b-21)!

**3. To Judge Means to Deliver**

God as our Judge delivers us from condemnation and the tyranny of sin because He is the true Liberator (John 8:32, 36; Rom 8:2; 2 Cor 3:17; Gal 5:1, 13). He is the Victor over Satan (John 12:31-32; 14:30; 16:11), therefore He is able to deliver from different addictions to sin. He is the Giver of freedom. We are in danger of slavery to sin (Rom 6:11-18), and our Judge delivers us from the power of the evil one (Mat 6:13). "Throughout the Bible those who experience God's deliverance experience it through his judgment," accurately claims Hamilton.<sup>25</sup> God delivered His people from slavery in Egypt and set them free in the midst of His judgment upon the Egyptian gods and upon those who associated with them (Exod 3:8; 5:2; 6:6; 7:5; 12:12). This deliverance goes even deeper, to be free from sin means to be healed (Ps 41:4). Salvation is ultimately deliverance

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*shachat* is used): God has destroyed what humans had already destroyed! Thus, the pun reveals God's actual reaction to the performance of evil. In other words, in the Flood God destroyed one big "concentration camp" of evil. To destroy is not His nature, because He is the Creator, Giver and Sustainer of life. His negative judgments are His "strange work" and "alien task" (Isa 28:21), and He has no pleasure in the death of the wicked (2 Sam 14:14; Ezek 18:23, 32; 33:11). When the Lord had to wipe out the wicked, He "was grieved" and "his heart was filled with pain" (Gen 6:6)! This is in great contrast to the extrabiblical flood stories where angry gods destroy humans (like, for example, in the *Epic of Atrahasis*)! John in the book of Revelation wisely connects God's judgment at the second coming of Jesus with Genesis 6 by pointing out that God will destroy "those who destroy the earth" (Rev 11:18).

<sup>25</sup> Hamilton, "The Glory of God," 62.

from the power of sin and a complete well-being or healing. The Greek word *soteria* conveys this rich meaning.<sup>26</sup>

God helps us to understand the nature of God's judgment through the Old Testament book of Judges. What was the primary function of these judges? To condemn, punish, or destroy God's people? On the contrary, judges were sent by God to deliver them from the oppression and devastation of their enemies. They were called to protect, care, save, deliver, and liberate God's people from their foes. They were there to give and secure freedom! This book should be named the "Book of Liberators" or "Deliverers." Köhler maintains that these judges were "helpers."<sup>27</sup> Judgment for God is His passionate way of demonstrating His positive attitude toward the oppressed, His coming to rescue them!

God wants our freedom and the original intention of His law was to protect our freedom. It is important to observe that God's first command was actually commanding freedom: "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden (Gen 2:16). True freedom lies in accepting our limits and God's instructions and discipline (Prov 1:1-7).

#### **4. To Judge Means to Vindicate**

Our Judge vindicates His people against the accusations of our archenemy Satan who is against us, but God is always for us. The Psalmist reassures: "For the Lord will vindicate his people and have compassion on his servants" (Ps 135:14). The story of Job reveals this truth. In the heavenly tribunal, Satan accused Job of impure selfish motives: "Does Job fear God for nothing" (Job 1:6, 9)? The key term in this devilish question is the word *chinnam* ("for nothing").<sup>28</sup> In this court setting, God is on the side of Job even though He cannot answer directly and immediately Satan's accusation, because the Accuser can be defeated only by someone who is

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<sup>26</sup> See Kittel and Friedrich, 7:965-998; Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2d ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 801; Ceslas Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 3:344-357.

<sup>27</sup> Köhler, 157.

<sup>28</sup> This is a crucial term in the book of Job occurring four times and stated by different persons: Job 1:9 (Satan), 2:3 (God), 9:17 (Job), and 22:6 (Eliphaz). This word has plentiful meanings: "without reason," "gratis," "in vain," "for no purpose," "undeservedly," "unselfishly." See BDB, 336.

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weaker than he is and not by God's argumentation or power. At the end, God accomplishes moral victory when Job's unselfish love, trust, and service are revealed. Ultimately God's love, truth, and justice prevails (Pss 100:5; 101:1; 103:8-11; 117),<sup>29</sup> and God is just while justifying sinners (Ps 51:4; Rom 3:4, 26).<sup>30</sup> This theodicy is the heart of the spiritual warfare.<sup>31</sup>

John declares that Jesus silenced Satan's accusations because of His victory on the cross. His blood defeated Satan's charge that a loving devotion to God is impossible. Christ's victory is claimed by His followers. He identifies with them (Zech 2:8; Matt 25:40, 45; Acts 9:1-6), so they associate with Him, willingly follow wherever He leads (Rev 14:4), and follow Him faithfully even to the point of death. John reports that he heard a loud voice in heaven which described this reality: "Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death. Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short" (Rev 12:10-12). Satan accuses, but God defends and vindicates (Zech 3:1-4; Dan 12:1; Rom 8:31-39; Heb 7:25).

#### Additional Examples

I have stressed the positive aspect of divine judgment in order to provide a proper framework and thought pattern about this essential activity of God. In order to explain this affirmative value, I provide additional examples from the Hebrew Bible:

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<sup>29</sup> Many scholars argue for the unity between love and justice in judgment, because it is God's very nature (Exod 34:6-7). "The judgment of God in the OT is inseparable from the love and mercy of God" (McConville, 25). See also Hamilton, "The Glory of God," 62-65; James P. Danaher, "Forgiveness, Mercy and Judgment," *Modern Believing* 48, no. 4 (2007): 30-39; Randall C. Zachman, "The Unity of Judgment and Love," *Ex Auditu* 20 (2004): 148-161.

<sup>30</sup> On how God vindicates Himself before the nations, see Ezek 28:22, 25; 36:23; 38:16, 23; 39:7. The phrase "I will show Myself holy through you" is only used within the entire Bible in Ezek 36:23 and 38:16.

<sup>31</sup> For further study of Job's case, see my article "The God of Job and Our Adversary," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 15, no. 2 (Autumn 2004): 104-117.

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1. The most elaborate judgment scene in the Hebrew Bible is found in Daniel 7. Verse 22 describes the positive aspect of the heavenly pre-advent judgment (see Dan 7:9-10, 13-14). The Aramaic text literally reads: “Until the Ancient of Days came, and judgment was given for the saints of the Most High.” The special grammatical devise, namely “given for,” contains a preposition *lamed* which is in this context the “lamed of advantage.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, the text should be translated more precisely in the following way: “Until the Ancient of Days came and the judgment was pronounced in favor of the saints of the Most High” (translation is mine).<sup>33</sup> What a beautiful picture of God who is for us and never against us! He is doing everything possible to legally secure our place in heaven (John 14:1-3). It is significant that this chapter describes God’s condemnation of the little horn (7:26) only after Daniel presents God’s judgment to His people’s advantage (7:22).

2. David prays: “Judge me, O Lord!” David asks God this on three occasions (Pss 7:8; 26:1; 35:24).<sup>34</sup> If judgment mainly has a negative meaning, then, of course, David would never express such a prayer. He is not begging for condemnation or punishment. He hopes for God’s deliverance from his enemies and asks God for protection from his opponents.

The context clearly explains that David needs God’s vindication. Enemies were pressing him, and there was no one who could defend him but God, therefore he requests: “Lord, please save me from the hand of my enemies, only you can help me, rescue me, please intervene on my behalf” (my paraphrase).

Did you ever pray: “Judge me, O Lord”? We do not have the courage to pray such a prayer, because we have a wrong perception of the divine

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<sup>32</sup> Herbert C. Leupold, *Exposition of Daniel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1949), 321. William L. Holladay explains that the stylistic construction *dina*’ together with the verb *yehib* and preposition *lamed* signifies that the “(favorable) judgment is being given in favor” of the saints of the Most High (*A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988], 402).

<sup>33</sup> In that sense the NIV and NKJV correctly translate this verse as do many other modern translations of this Aramaic text.

<sup>34</sup> For the fourth time, the same request is made by the sons of Korah (Psalms 42 and 43 form a unit): “Vindicate me, O God” (Ps 43:1).

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judgment—we are scared of it. However, through this prayer, God's Word helps us to see judgment in a different light.

3. The Messiah announces the Day of the Lord as a day of great salvation. Isaiah declares that God's vengeance will bring consolation to the mourners of Zion (Isa 61:2-3).

4. Moses in his concluding victorious and prophetic song assures: "The Lord will judge his people and have compassion on his servants when he sees their strength is gone and no one is left, slave or free. . . . Rejoice, O nations, with his people, for he will avenge the blood of his servants" (Deut 32:36, 43).

5. God through the prophet Isaiah admonishes: "Listen to me, my people; hear me, my nation: The law will go out from me; my justice will become a light to the nations. My righteousness draws near speedily, my salvation is on the way, and my arm will bring justice to the nations. The islands will look to me and wait in hope for my arm" (Isa 51:4-5). The Hebrew text literally states: ". . . and my arms will judge the peoples [nations]," and thus in God's judging activity even the nations afar will put their hope! When God judges He establishes justice.

6. David declares: "The Lord reigns forever; he has established his throne for judgment. He will judge the world in righteousness; he will govern the peoples with justice" (Ps 9:7-8). What is the purpose of His judgment? "The Lord is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble" (v. 9), and David reassures that the Lord will never forsake those who seek Him (v. 10).

7. King David eloquently presents from God's perspective an enormous difference between the fates of the wicked and the righteous when He judges the people: "The Lord is in his holy temple; the Lord is on his heavenly throne. He observes the sons of men; his eyes examine them. The Lord examines the righteous, but the wicked and those who love violence his soul hates. On the wicked he will rain fiery coals and burning sulfur; a scorching wind will be their lot. For the Lord is righteous, he loves justice; upright men will see his face" (Ps 11:4-7; see also Matt 5:8).

8. The Poet describes God, from His heavenly command center, setting free those who are doomed to death: "The Lord looked down from his sanctuary on high, from heaven he views the earth, to hear the groans of the prisoners and release those condemned to death" (Ps 102:19-20; see also Pss 11:4-5; 68:34-35; 73:16-17, 25-28; 77:12-13). This is why God's

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people are crying for God's help (Pss 7:1; 27:4-8, 13-14; 28:1-2; 31:1-5; 42:2; 84:1-2; 130:1-8; 142:1-2).

9. When God sends His message of judgment to people, it is a message of grace—an opportunity to repent; see the experience of the Ninevites (Jonah 3:6-10) or Daniel's messages to Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 4:27-33). God does not want people to die as informed sinners. His message has the power to change people, if they are willing to listen, obey, and repent from their arrogance, stubbornness, or indifference (Isa 55:11).

10. The first-class verse in regard to God's positive judgment is Isa 35:4. This is an outstanding message to those who are afraid of judgment. God instructs Isaiah to encourage people: "Say to those with fearful hearts, 'Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.'" This is the news which needs to be widely preached and spread.

As we have demonstrated above, there is a plethora of positive examples in regard to God's judgment in the Hebrew Scriptures, and this view is confirmed also in the New Testament. John in his first epistle stresses: "And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming" (1 John 2:28) and again "In this way, 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).<sup>35</sup> As Seventh-day Adventist Christians, we should be the first to stress this positive meaning of God's judgment in order that people can be attracted to our gracious and beautiful God, and really understand the Gospel in the judgment (without denying or neglecting the other side of the coin), and look forward to that event, and with full confidence pray: "Judge me, O Lord!"<sup>36</sup> Because if they will not ask for it, God as their Judge cannot justify, save, deliver, and vindicate them.

The Apostle Paul provides the same positive meaning of God's judgment. In 1 Cor 4:1-5, he declares: "It is the Lord who judges" (v. 4) and then he adds: "Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will

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<sup>35</sup> In both texts, the Greek word *parresia* is used which means "bold assurance," "confidence." See Bauer, 630; Spicq, 56-62.

<sup>36</sup> Ellen G. White stresses how our preaching and teaching has to uplift Christ and be Christ centered. See *Gospel Workers* (Battle Creek, MI: Review & Herald, 1892), 156 and 315.

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expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God" (v. 5). At the judgment God will praise His faithful followers! What a glorious image of God's love for us!

**Rabbinic Witness**

I support this positive dimension of God's judgment with ancient rabbinic sources, because in their understanding Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), traditionally known as the Day of Judgment, is actually the Day of Salvation. The paradoxical nature of Yom Kippur is well expressed by Naphtali Winter: "Despite the repentance and abstinence practiced on Yom Kippur, it was never a sad day. Its atmosphere was solemn but this was always accompanied by the confidence and joy at finding atonement."<sup>37</sup> This affirmative picture of God's judgment is documented in the *Mishna* where Rabbi Simeon ben Gamaliel depicts the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*) as a day of joy: "There were no happier days for Israel than the 15<sup>th</sup> of Ab and the Day of Atonement, for on them the daughters of Israel used to go forth in white raiments . . . to dance in the vineyards."<sup>38</sup> The *Jerusalem Talmud* aptly states: "Normally, someone standing in judgment would dress somberly, cloaking himself in black robes and not trim his beard. After all, he does not know how it will turn out. Israel is different, though. We dress in white and cloak ourselves in white and trim our beards and eat and drink and are joyous for we know that God will do miracles for us. Being judged by God is at once an awesome thing—He knows all—but He is a merciful God. Even judgment itself need not be devoid of joy."<sup>39</sup>

Rabbi Akiva reminds people that "the world is judged by [divine] goodness, . . . the judgment is a true judgment, and all is prepared for the banquet."<sup>40</sup> Rabbi Judah said that the Holy One "sits and issues judgments

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<sup>37</sup> Naphtali Winter, ed., *The High Holy Days*, Popular Judaica Library (Jerusalem: Keter Books, 1973), 64. The *Babylonian Talmud* states: "It has been taught: 'All are judged' on New Year and their doom is sealed on the Day of Atonement" (*Rosh HaShanah* 16a). Philip Birnbaum proclaims: "On Rosh Hashanah their destiny is inscribed, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed" (*High Holiday Prayer Book: Yom Kippur* [New York: Hebrew Publishing Co., 1960], 508).

<sup>38</sup> *Ta'anith* 4.8 (Herbert Danby's translation).

<sup>39</sup> *Rosh HaShanah* 1:3.

<sup>40</sup> Hayim N. Bialik and Yehoshua H. Ravnitzky, *The Book of Legends: Legends from the Talmud and Midrash* (New York: Schocken Books, 1992), 561:237.



for the entire world, all of it—when He sees that the world is so guilty as to deserve extermination, He rises from the throne of judgment and sits down on the throne of compassion.”<sup>41</sup> Rabbi Schwadron asserts that “everyday judgment of God brings joy, because it changes our view of things.”<sup>42</sup>

### **Crucial Observations**

Only people who are on death row can rejoice over the news that there will be a trial addressing their situation. This news means new hope for their case. When we accept that we are condemned to eternal death because of our sins, then we can actually rejoice over the news that there will be God’s judgment. This judgment is our only hope! It is a chance for sinners to be saved, however, in this judgment all depends on our relationship with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

We need to realize that the court system in Ancient Israel was different in comparison to our Western system of justice. In our society’s court system, we mainly have two individuals (besides the prosecutor and jury), each with a different function, for ensuring justice in our case (and in our culture we have good reasons for doing so). These two main figures are the judge (whose principal function is understood to be sentencing or condemning people) and an attorney (to defend the accused persons). But in ancient Israel there were no attorneys! Only one person was needed in legal procedures—a judge who was at the same time an attorney. One individual fulfilled both functions. The judge was perceived as the savior! Only he could deliver and vindicate an accused person from injustice. If

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<sup>41</sup> Bailik and Ravnitzky, 510:55. See also the following statement: “The Holy One said: ‘If I create the world with the attribute of mercy alone, its sins will be too many; if with justice alone, how could the world be expected to endure? So I will create it with both justice and mercy, and may it endure’” (Bailik and Ravnitzky, 7:12)!

<sup>42</sup> Paysach J. Krohn, *The Maggid Speaks: Favorite Stories and Parables of Rabbi Sholom Schwadron* (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications, 1987), 184-185. Richard M. Davidson excellently explains the joy of judgment from the Adventist perspective in his article “The Good News of Yom Kippur in Seventh-day Adventist Theology,” *Shabbat Shalom: A Journal for Jewish-Christian Reconciliation* 55, no. 2 (2007): 4-8.

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someone needed help, only a judge could intervene and bring solution to the problem (Luke 18:2-8).<sup>43</sup>

We today associate judgment with fear, but the biblical authors connected judgment with surpassing joy. Consider the verbs in the following biblical passage which describes an attitude toward judgment: “Rejoice . . . be glad . . . resound . . . be jubilant . . . sing for joy . . . sing before the LORD for he comes to judge the earth” (Ps 96:11-13; recited in 1 Chr 16:31-36). Also a psalm of the sons of Korah reiterates: “Mount Zion rejoices, the villages of Judah are glad because of your judgments” (Ps 48:11).

I am convinced that God does not need to organize a judgment in heaven in order to condemn humanity, because we are already condemned to death (we are all sinners, guilty, and doomed to death, and if God would not intervene in our favor we would certainly die). God does not need to condemn us for the second time. But when He judges us again at the pre-advent judgment, it means that His principal purpose is different: He secures legally our place in heaven in front of the heavenly court for all eternity. This judgment also unmasks the antagonistic activities of the little horn before the universe (Daniel 7-8).

Thus, we do not need to be afraid of God's pre-advent judgment, because at that judgment He affirms, confirms, reveals, discloses, and demonstrates to the heavenly world the decisions we made for Him during our lifetime. He will not add anything else to our decisions and neither will He alter them. As the faithful and true Witness of our lives, He testifies for His people that we are His (Rom 8:31; Rev 3:14). Paul states clearly: “The Lord knows those who are His” (2 Tim 2:19; compare Num 16:5). The pre-advent judgment does not pronounce a new sentence in contrast to what we experience in our daily life. Jesus will only verify and affirm God's saving activity or the condemnation of a particular person.

The destruction of all the wicked, evil angels, and Satan himself is good news because there will no longer be an evil force or sin which will destroy what is valuable, good, and beautiful. There will be no more death,

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<sup>43</sup> For details on the role of the judge in the biblical times, see C. Brown, “Judge,” in *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible*, rev., full-color ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 3:838-839; Keillor, 65-66; Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (London: Longman & Todd Ltd., 1961), 143-163.

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pain, criminality, or disease. No more cemeteries, jails, and hospitals! Love, peace, creative work and meaningful relationships will be the content of life. God's love, truth, and justice in judgment will prevail (see Phil 2:10-11; Rev 15:3-4).

The only way we can stand before the holy God is by His grace. We are saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ (Gen 15:6; Hab 2:4; Rom 1:16; 3:22-31; Eph 2:4-10; Gal 2:16; Titus 2:11-14). He is more than willing to save us; by walking with such a gracious God, it is easier to be saved than to be lost (Rom 8:35-39; Eph 1:9-10; 1 Tim 2:3-4; 2 Tim 1:9-10; 2 Pet 3:9). We have eternal life not because we feel it, but because God says so (Ps 10:12; Isa 1:18; 38:17; Mic 7:18-19; 1 John 1:7-9; 3:20)!

**Conclusion**

We are used to thinking negatively about God's judgment, however, the Bible provides a different paradigm regarding this essential divine activity, and we need to learn to perceive it as an affirmatory event. God is for His people and never against them! Only when we are attracted to God by His goodness and beauty are we then able to respond positively to Him (Ps 27:4; Rom 2:4), because as a consequence of the first sin, we are all afraid of God, and we are hiding from Him (Gen 3:10). Zimmerli has it right: "The judgment makes known Yahweh's nature."<sup>44</sup> He reveals through it who He is. The God-centered nature of judgment in the Bible is evident from all the above mentioned examples. The Lord as Judge is the Savior.<sup>45</sup>

The biblical record is transparent: the primary meaning of God's judgment is to justify, save, deliver, and vindicate. When we ask God for forgiveness, praying for it honestly, openly, and sincerely, God as our Judge forgives our sins and proclaims us right. He does that and can do it, because He is our heavenly Judge! God's eschatological judgment breaks into our time, and we are judged favorably; we pass from death to life; we are not condemned and have eternal life (Gen 15:6; John 3:16-17, 36; 5:22-24)! Only when we do not accept the positive dimension of God's judgment are we under condemnation, i.e., the negative meaning of His judgment!

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<sup>44</sup> Walther Zimmerli, "The Word of God in the Book of Ezekiel," *The Fiery Throne: The Prophets and Old Testament* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003), 106.

<sup>45</sup> For further study, see Zachman's outstanding article in which he argues about the unity of justice and love and explains that "the judgment of God is an expression of the love of God" (152).

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The proclamation of the judgment in the context of Revelation 14 is very good news, and it is a part of the eternal Gospel. From this *indicative* of the Gospel that “His judgment hour has come” springs the *imperative* of the Gospel: “Fear God and give glory to him, . . . and worship Him who created” everything (Rev 14:7). The Gospel is a proclamation of the good news about God as our Judge!<sup>46</sup>

Judgment is about restoring justice.<sup>47</sup> The Psalmist cries: “Rise up, O Judge of the earth . . . How long will the wicked, O Lord, how long will the wicked be jubilant” (Ps 94:2-3; see also Ps 74:10; Hab 1:2-3; Rev 6:10)? True uncorrupted justice can be inaugurated only by God; His love, truth, and justice will prevail! The only solution to our sinful situation and in order to not be under condemnation is to accept and personally know our Judge, because in the face of our Judge we can recognize the face of our Savior (Gen 3:9, 15, 21; Isa 63:6-9)!<sup>48</sup>

At the end when Jesus comes in glory with the holy angels, only two groups of people will be there. One group will cry in desperation to the mountains and rocks: “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?” (Rev 6:15-16), but the other group with victorious shouts of great joy will look up with confidence expressing their realized hope: “Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the LORD, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his

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<sup>46</sup> Revelation 14:7–8 reveals two kind of judgments—the first one is positive (v. 7) and the second one, judgment on Babylon, is negative (v. 8), as the context demonstrates.

<sup>47</sup> For more studies on God's justice, see Enrique Nardoni, *Rise Up, O Judge: A Study of Justice in the Biblical World* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004); Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005); Chris Marshall, *The Little Book of Biblical Justice* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2005), N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006); Stephen H. Travis, *Christ and the Judgment of God: The Limits of Divine Retribution in New Testament Thought* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008).

<sup>48</sup> This truth is eloquently explained in the following quotation: “Make friendship with Christ today. Put your case in the hands of the great Advocate. He will plead your cause before the Father. Though you have transgressed the law, and must plead guilty before God, Christ will present his precious blood in your behalf, and through faith and obedience, and vital union with Christ, you may stand acquitted before the Judge of all the earth, and he will be your friend when the final trump shall sound, and the scenes of earth shall be no more” (Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, 27 July 1888).

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salvation” (Isa 25:9). Words cannot catch their excitement! The choice is ours!

Can we hide from God? David proclaims that God is everywhere and there is no place to conceal us from Him (Psalm 139). But still, there is a special place where the Heavenly Father cannot “find” those who follow Him. This unique hiding place is in Jesus when we accept Him as our personal Savior. David prays: “Rescue me from my enemies, O Lord, for I hide myself in you” (Pss 32:7; 143:9; see also Zeph 2:3). The “in Christ” motif means that the heavenly Father looks upon us but sees His beloved Son Jesus Christ. When we are in Christ, all that is His is given to us as a free gift, the result of His amazing grace. His purity is our purity, His righteousness is our righteousness, His perfection is our perfection, His character is our character, and we are accepted by our heavenly Father as if we had never sinned!

Peter Brunner, former theologian and professor of systematic theology in Heidelberg, excellently and with detailed precision explains the relationship between our identity and God’s judgment. He touches the core of the matter: “Living in every instance in the judgment of God makes our life what it is. Living in the judgment of God is the creative power that makes us what we actually are. We do not make ourselves what we are; God’s judgment about us makes what we are, for the judgment of God works very differently from human judgment. . . . I am what God thinks about me. God’s judgment carries with it the immediate power of execution. God’s decree creates what it says. . . . If God decrees, ‘He is my beloved child,’ then that is what I really am, even when so much seems to speak against it. . . . God’s judgment about you and me creates the basic foundation of our existence. I live as I live in the judgment of God. I am what I am through the judgment of God. Any weight that I might place on the scale of my life produces only a superficial and temporary swing. But what God’s judgment brings into my life shifts the balance for all time and eternity. That is why the question of what God thinks of me is the most important of all questions.”<sup>49</sup>

Praise the Lord that God is our Judge!

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<sup>49</sup> Brunner, 282.

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