

The Judgment and Good News

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Judgment. You're told you have to attend a court. How you feel? Pleased, joyful, excited? As the day comes round you jump out of bed with happy anticipation and drive to the court building full of exhilaration? No, no and thrice no, right?

The whole idea of judgment is full of negative overtones in our society. The idea of God as Judge does not thrill the heart. That's because our modern system of justice tends to look at the judgment process only in terms of conviction or acquittal. But judgment systems of the past (as in Jesus' time) were very much concerned with not only convicting criminals, but vindicating the righteous in a very positive way. But in our minds, the picture is like this:

I can't see anything at first. A heavy weight of darkness presses down on me, thick gloom like I'm being suffocated by a black velvet blanket. I rub my eyes, terrified I've gone blind. Just like a child I'm full of fears of everything that goes bump in the night.

Then I hear the throbbing of a somber drumbeat, like that of a slow-marching execution squad. Shrill trumpets blare and suddenly I'm dazzled by a blazing searchlight. Trapped in that narrow circle of light, I am imprisoned as the victim. Lightning whip-cracks and deafening thunder crashes. I want to crawl away somewhere...

Great thrones are set up in the circling gallery above me. The place is full of rich purple, gold filigree and black velvet: an awesome scene of overpowering majesty and might. A heavy bell rings out its doleful knell of doom; a monstrous organ crashes out swirling chords; a huge gong clangs with terrifying ear-splitting noise. My head spins, my body shakes, my heart stops. Like some panic-stricken mouse I'm about to die of fright. All around and above me this vast court machine grinds on in all its relentless dignity and power. I want to fall through a crack in the floor...

Then a million million eyes stare. Hands point in accusation. Wildly I look around for some way out, but everywhere I see these same accusers chanting: "Guilty! Guilty!" The hunters have their sacrificial prey, the accused trembles in the dock, the criminal cowers to be rightly condemned. From high above the great voice of command resounds through the echoing chambers of this awesome trial: "LET JUDGMENT BEGIN!"

I want to die...

I close my eyes and wait for the ax to fall. Waiting...waiting... Pleading: "Please finish it all. I'm guilty! I confess. Just make it quick. Don't torment me any longer. Please..."

Nothing comes. After an eternity of waiting I slowly open my eyes. A man in white smiles at me. He takes my hand and leads me away.

"But what about this...?" I turn back and point at the courtroom, the pointing fingers and the shouts of 'Guilty!' But they've all disappeared. "Oh, it's all gone. Whatever happened to the judgment? Wasn't I about to be sentenced? Fearful condemnation and all that. So what about that terrifying

picture of God's Last Judgment?"

"It's not like that," he says softly.

"Huh? Come on--what's that text? 'We all have to come before the judgment seat of God' or something. And I remember the sermons: 'And God will unmercifully smite all his wretched unfaithful servants...'"

"It's not like that."

"Then there's the lake of fire and the brimstone hail and the excruciating burning of the lawbreakers. That's the judgment, and it's got to be done. 'In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God.'" I smile to myself: I know the texts, but this poor guy really doesn't know his Bible! "'Vengeance is mine saith the Lord, I will repay.' For God to be truly good and righteous he has to pour out his wrath on the rebellious unbelievers and fearsomely punish all those who refuse to obey him. It's only fair. Part of the reward for the righteous is avoiding all that burning alive as the wicked are punished."

The man in white doesn't need to say 'It's not like that.' I can see it in his saddened eyes. He sighs: "Do you honestly believe that's the Judgment of the righteous Judge? What sort of End is this? What kind of reason to be good? Certainly those who refuse my healing, my offers of rescue and reconciliation, they will experience the results of going their own way--self-destruction. The wage that sin pays is death. But I am not the Executioner. I destroy no one--they destroy themselves. Besides, what sort of person says 'Do as I say or I'll burn you alive?'"

He has a point there! Only a sadist, a dictator, a terrorist. Is God really like that? But there must be an End. The good must finally be vindicated. God must be proved right. And the wicked must get what they deserve!

The man in white turns slowly to me, knowing my thoughts. Looking straight into my eyes he asks quietly: "And what do you deserve?"

I keep quiet. Doesn't seem like the time or the place to rattle off my good behavior record.

So what of this terror-filled vision of Judgment? How are we meant to think of God as the righteous Judge? At the heart of the matter is the real question: What is God like? Is he out to threaten us, to scare us to him? Does he use the "Hound of Hell" to drive us back to him in terrified obedience? Is this Judgment belief like a sword hanging over our heads, an ever-present threat that makes us want God because we are so frightened of the Alternative? Or is the Judgment something positive?

Time to think. Seriously!

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