

Judgment Day— Not to Be Feared

“He hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.”

—Acts 17:31

OUR OPENING TEXT

clearly teaches that there is to be a future judgment day for the world of mankind, but tradition has attached many unreasonable and even repulsive ideas to the Bible’s teachings on this subject. In the minds of many it is thought to be a day of doom, when a majority of mankind will be consigned to an eternity of torment, while relatively few

will be taken away to heaven.

From the standpoint of tradition there is actually no good reason why there should be a future day of judgment, for supposedly the eternal destiny of every individual is fixed at death. Believers who are worthy, tradition says, go immediately to heaven when they die, while unbelievers are consigned to a hell of torment. However, since the Bible clearly reveals that there is to be a future judgment day, an effort had

to be made by the creed-makers to fit this into their theology.

Such efforts have made for confusion. The judgment day proposed by the creeds of men is visualized as being only twenty-four hours in length. In a symbolic judgment day scene presented in Revelation 20:12, the “dead, small and great,” are shown standing before God. This was given a literal interpretation—that all believers who, at death, were judged worthy of going to heaven, would be brought back from heaven, and all the sinners who had been condemned to hell-fire would be brought back from hell, all of whom would pass before the judgment seat of God in a twenty-four hour period.

Surely no good purpose could be served by this. We cannot imagine that any mistakes could have been made in the decisions which were reached at death, which, according to tradition, place the dead into one of two classes, consigning them either to heaven or to hell. There is, of course, the additional tradition concerning a third group which, following death, enter an intermediate state, called purgatory. As with most of the theories which have come down to us through the medium of tradition, this one also is unreasonable, and without support in the Bible.

MORE THAN A SENTENCE

Tradition is erroneous in limiting the meaning of the word judgment to the passing of sentence. Just as a judge in court first hears the evidence for or against the one on trial before passing sentence, so those who are sentenced before the bar of divine justice are first given an opportunity to prove their worthiness or unworthiness of God's favor.

Our first example of the operation of this principle is the case of Adam. In Romans 5:16 the Apostle Paul speaks of “judgment” coming upon all through Adam “to condemnation.” The sentence which came upon Adam, “Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return,” was the culmination of his judgment. Prior to this he had been given an opportunity to demonstrate his loyalty to God’s law. Failing in this, he was sentenced to death.—Gen. 3:19

It is important to notice in connection with Adam’s judgment that he was given full information concerning the Lord’s requirements. He was not in ignorance of the issue involved. Here is another essential principle which operates in all of God’s dealings with his intelligent creatures. They are never on trial before him without knowing it, and without the necessary information concerning his will for them. No one will fail to receive the grace of God because of ignorance, and no one will attain salvation without the necessary knowledge concerning Jesus Christ, the Redeemer, and the will of God for those who accept this gift of his love.

ANCIENTS PROVED WORTHY

When Adam sinned and began to die, it meant that all his progeny were imperfect, and therefore under condemnation to death. “In Adam all die,” the Apostle Paul says. (I Cor. 15:22) Nevertheless, from Adam’s day to the first advent of Jesus, there were individuals who demonstrated their faith in God and their loyalty to him and to his cause. The first of these was Abel. The last, of record, was John the Baptist.

In the chapter 11 of Hebrews many of these faithful ancients are noted, including the difficulties they

encountered in proving their devotion to God. Paul explains that they endured the trials which came upon them that they might “obtain a better resurrection.” He also speaks of their being “made perfect” in the resurrection. This means, we believe, that when these faithful ones are awakened from the sleep of death they will be perfect human beings, and be fully qualified to conduct the work of God which will then be assigned to them in connection with the Messianic kingdom.—Heb. 11:35,39,40

While these ancient ones of faith were not given a full understanding of the plans and purposes of God for the restoration of the human race to life through Jesus, God did favor them with sufficient knowledge upon which to decide whether or not they would devote themselves fully to him, regardless of the cost. Abel, one of Adam’s sons, surely knew of God’s prophetic statement that at some future time the “seed” of the woman, Eve, would “bruise” the serpent’s head. (Gen. 3:15; Rom. 16:20) From this Abel would know that God had some plan for overcoming the havoc which had been wrought in Eden by the Devil, and he wanted to be on God’s side and share in that future triumph of righteousness.

The Scriptures inform us that “Enoch also, the seventh from Adam,” prophesied concerning the coming of the Lord to execute judgment. (Jude 1:14) This indicates that Enoch was given enough understanding upon which to base his decision to take his stand on the Lord’s side. With the passage of time the plan of God unfolded more and more, as one after another of the holy prophets was caused to testify concerning it, giving the worthy ones of

old a definite basis for their faith and an inspiring loyalty to the divine cause.

JUDGMENT DAYS OF OLD

We might say, therefore, that the entire period from the fall of man in Eden until the First Advent of Christ was a “judgment day,” during which faithful servants of old proved their worthiness of being made “princes in all the earth.” (Ps. 45:16) When they are awakened from the sleep of death and given perfect human bodies, as the Scriptures indicate will be the case, they will need to continue their faithfulness in order to maintain everlasting life. However, so far as their past is concerned, they received “a good report through faith.” They passed their trial successfully.—Heb. 11:39

Beginning with the giving of the Law by Moses, the nation of Israel entered upon a special day of judgment. Through the Law, as epitomized in the Ten Commandments, the will of God was expressed for the Israelites. Jesus said to the Jews in his day, “If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments.” (Matt. 19:16,17) For Israel, faithfulness to the Law would have resulted in an honored position as a “kingdom of priests, and a holy nation.”—Exod. 19:3-6

The Lord granted the people of Israel a long period of probation in which to prove their worthiness or unworthiness of the blessings promised under the Law, but they failed. Paul explains: “Death reigned from Adam to Moses [that is, to the giving of the Law to Israel], even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam’s transgression.” (Rom. 5:14) Adam’s sin was individual and willful, and his

progeny shared in the condemnation regardless of their individual responsibility. However, as Paul indicates, so far as the Israelites were concerned this was changed by their agreeing to obey God's Law. This placed them in a special position of responsibility before God, in which they failed.

The promise that if obedient to the Law they would become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation was made to the Israelites. In this also they failed to qualify, and Jesus said to the representative leaders of the nation, that the kingdom would be taken from them and "given to a nation bringing forth the fruits" which God expected. (Matt. 21:43) Later the Apostle Peter identified this new nation to which God's kingdom would be given. To footstep followers of Jesus, he wrote: "Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light; Which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy."—I Pet. 2:9,10

THE PRESENT JUDGMENT DAY

The Scriptures reveal that following the First Advent of Christ another judgment day began, Jesus himself being the first one involved. Jesus came into the world to accomplish the divine purpose of redeeming mankind from death and of restoring the willing and obedient to life. However, to serve the divine cause in this manner, Jesus had to be tested.

In the prophetic words of the psalmist, Jesus is quoted as saying, "Lo, I come: in the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to do thy will, O my

God: yea, thy law is within my heart.” (Ps. 40:7,8) The thought here expressed is that when Jesus came at his First Advent, it was for the purpose of accomplishing all that had been previously written, or prophesied, concerning him. This, as Jesus said, he delighted to do, for God’s law was within his innermost heart.

As prophesied in the Old Testament, the divine will for Jesus was that he was to sacrifice his flesh, his humanity, in death for the sins of the world. (Isa. 53:5,6,10; Dan. 9:24,26) This he willingly and gladly did, and in doing it he proved his worthiness of the sacred responsibility his Heavenly Father had placed in him. Had he been unfaithful he would have lost all, even life itself.

That Jesus was severely tested is brought to our attention by the incident in which Peter urged him not to go to Jerusalem, where his enemies were waiting to arrest him and put him to death. To this Jesus replied, “Get thee behind me, Satan.” He then added the explanation that anyone who took up his cross to follow him, and then sought to save his life, would lose it. (Mark 8:31-35) Jesus knew that since he had covenanted to lay down his life for the sins of the world, any holding back to save his life, as Peter had suggested, would mean unfaithfulness, and would result in the loss of his own life, in the sense that he would not be raised from the dead.

Of Jesus it is written that he “learned obedience by the things which he suffered.” (Heb. 5:8) Jesus had always been obedient to his Heavenly Father. In his prehuman existence he had served his Father faithfully, and God was delighted with him. However, not until he came to earth and encountered

the prejudice, jealousy, and the hatred of the fallen human race, did Jesus know, by experience, what it meant to be obedient in suffering. Faithfully he served God in the face of opposition engendered by these blighting manifestations of mankind's sinful nature. This was the great lesson which Jesus learned during the three and one-half years of his earthly ministry, and he proved faithful to this ultimate test.

JESUS' FOLLOWERS ALSO TESTED

Beginning with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the followers of Jesus have been on probation, the opportunity being theirs of proving worthy not only to live with Christ, but also to reign with him in his thousand-year kingdom. (II Tim. 2:11,12; Rev. 20:4,6) As with the people of God in previous ages, these also have been enlightened with respect to the divine will for them. Since they have been invited to prove their worthiness of reigning in the kingdom of Christ, Jesus said that it is their privilege to "know the mysteries of the kingdom." —Matt. 13:11

Through the acceptance of Jesus as their Redeemer, and upon the basis of faith in his shed blood, these surrender themselves to God and to the doing of his will. The merit, or value, of Christ's ransom sacrifice releases them from the original condemnation to death, and they now have the privilege of laying down their lives in service to the Heavenly Father and his divine cause. (Rom. 12:1) Paul speaks of their "patient continuance in well doing" by which they "seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life." (Rom. 2:7) It is during this entire lifetime

of dedication to the Lord that they are on trial to prove their worthiness of such a high reward.

As in the case of Jesus, the trial of his followers is a difficult, exacting one. The Apostle Peter wrote, "Think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy."—I Pet. 4:12,13

Peter understood that the "fiery trial" experiences of the followers of Jesus are in reality their "judgment" experiences. Thus, a few verses later in this chapter he writes, "The time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the Gospel of God? And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?"—vss. 17,18

The expression "if the righteous scarcely be saved" denotes the difficulties under which the followers of Jesus in this age, those who are laying down their lives sacrificially as Jesus did, prove their faithfulness. However, there is a compensating reward. To these Jesus said, "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life." "To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne."—Rev. 2:10; 3:21

THE WORLD'S JUDGMENT DAY

As we have seen, Peter explained that the judgment, or trial, of the Gospel Age "house of God" is a very exacting, difficult one, and he asks, "Where

shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?" Although the apostle does not answer this question in the verses immediately following, he explains the matter in his second epistle. The unenlightened, sin-cursed and dying race of mankind will appear in the world's future judgment, which is a "day," or period in God's plan, of a thousand years in length.—II Pet. 3:7,8

Peter describes that future day of judgment as one of perdition, or destruction, for ungodly men. This is in contrast with the present time, when all are dying, irrespective of whether they are righteously inclined or otherwise. However, Peter also explains that God is longsuffering, "not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance." (vs. 9) This is why a thousand years has been set aside in the divine plan for the enlightenment of the people, and for giving all a full opportunity to repent, obey, and live upon the basis of that enlightenment.

In Paul's sermon to the worldly-wise on Mars' hill in Athens, he spoke of the general ignorance of mankind, as represented in the many gods worshiped by the Athenians. He explained that God had "winked" at this ignorance, meaning did not hold responsible those who were unenlightened. "But now," Paul further stated, God "commandeth all men every where to repent," and quoting again our opening text, "Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead."—Acts 17:30,31

Paul's statement that now God "commandeth all men every where to repent" does not imply that this command has as yet *(Continued on page 36)*

(Continued from page 31) actually reached all men. He is merely calling attention to the fact that beginning with the First Advent of Jesus, the plan of God moved forward, and that through the Gospel, God was now calling individuals to repent, take up their cross, and follow Jesus. (Matt. 16:24) This message is not limited to any one nation or race of people, but as Jesus commissioned his disciples, it has been taken by them to all nations.—Matt. 28:19,20; Acts 1:7,8

“GIVEN ASSURANCE”

In our opening Scripture, Paul speaks of assurance in connection with the coming day of judgment. What assurance could possibly come from the tradition that the judgment day is in reality doomsday for the vast majority of the human race? The fact that “all men,” as they learn the truth about the coming judgment day, are “given assurance” by this knowledge, suggests that it will be a time of blessing. Indeed, it will be a time when they will have an opportunity to accept the provisions of life made for them through Christ, obey the laws of his kingdom, and live.

The work of that future judgment day will be based upon enlightenment. The psalmist prophesied that the Lord would come “to judge the earth: he shall judge the world with righteousness, and the people with his truth.” (Ps. 96:13) The Prophet Isaiah wrote that when the Lord’s judgments are abroad in the earth, “the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness.”—Isa. 26:9

Jesus explained the source of the information which will reach the world during the future day of judgment. He said, “If any man hear my words, and

believe not, I judge him not.” To this he added, “The word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day.” Jesus also explained that the words or commandments he had spoken were not his, but had been given to him by his Father. Then he said, “I know that his commandment is life everlasting.”
—John 12:47-50

Tradition would have us believe that those who hear the teachings of Jesus in this life, and for one reason or another do not accept and obey them, are judged unworthy of heaven, and forthwith consigned to an eternity in the torments of hell. However, Jesus did not agree with this tradition. He said that he did not judge unbelievers, but that his “word” would judge them in the “last day.” This last day, which will be a thousand years in length, is the final age in God’s plan of salvation—the same “day” during which Paul said the world will be judged “in righteousness.”

The meaning of Jesus’ words is obvious. Those who do not now accept the Gospel are not presently on trial for life, and, hence, are not now being judged. However, in the “last day” the truth of God’s will shall be made known to all. All the hindrances to belief will be removed, and then the commandments of God, his “word,” will constitute the basis of judgment for all mankind. Those who then accept and obey will, as Jesus explained, receive “life everlasting,” not in heaven with Jesus, but on earth as perfect human beings.

OPENING OF THE BOOKS

In Revelation 20:12 we are given a beautiful, symbolic lesson revealing God’s purpose to enlighten the

people with his truth during the future judgment day of the world. John wrote, "I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works."

Tradition tells us that the "books" which are opened in this text contain the records of the past lives of all humanity. The belief is that these books will be opened to ascertain the worthiness of each individual to spend eternity in heaven, or if unworthy, to be sent to eternal torment.

This tradition is seen at once to be wrong, because the text mentions the "works" of those who are judged as separate from the things "written in the books." They are judged by the laws and principles written in the books, according to whether their works are in harmony with these. The opening of these books symbolizes the revealing of God's truth—his commandments—to the people, upon the basis of which they will be judged. This is in harmony with the words previously quoted from John 12:47-50, wherein Jesus stated that his "word," which he explained was the "commandment" given to him by God, would judge the people in the "last day," the judgment day.

This judgment "according to their works," does not refer to past works, for those who are awakened from death and come up in the world's judgment day period are already known by God not to have been worthy of everlasting life. Rather, judgment will be according to mankind's works during that future "day." As they learn and seek to apply the words

and laws of God “written in the books,” each individual’s worthiness to attain everlasting life on earth will then be determined.

BOOK OF LIFE

Revelation 20:12 speaks of “another book” being opened, “the book of life.” The complete thought set forth in symbol in this text is that when the dead are awakened, they will, first of all, receive enlightenment, as symbolized by the opening of the “books.” As their works are gradually brought into conformity with the will of God, their names will be enrolled, symbolically speaking, in the “book of life.” They will no longer be subject to Adamic condemnation, but upon the basis of their individual acceptance of and obedience to the truth concerning Jesus as made known by the opened books, they will be traveling on the “way of holiness” toward eternal life.—Isa. 35:8

During that day of judgment those who do not take advantage of the gracious provisions of God, and who, according to their works at that time, fail to follow the “books” of his righteous laws, will not have their names enrolled in the “book of life.” These, which we believe will be few in number, will go again into death, the “second death,” symbolized by John’s words as the “lake of fire,” that is, complete and everlasting destruction. (Rev. 20:14,15) The Apostle Peter states the same truth concerning man’s future judgment day with these words: “It shall come to pass, that every soul, which will not hear that prophet, shall be destroyed from among the people.”—Acts 3:23

Speaking of Israel, Paul said that God “hath concluded them all in unbelief, that he might have

mercy upon all.” (Rom. 11:32) This same principle applies to all mankind who, like Israel, have similarly not believed God’s Word in this life. Indeed, in God’s judgment day there will be mercy for the Israelites because they lacked full understanding and were blinded by their prejudices. Likewise, there will be mercy for all who have died without having had a full opportunity to know and serve God. Then, “from the least of them unto the greatest of them,” all will know the Lord, for the earth shall be “full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea,” and God will “judge the world with righteousness, and the people with his truth.”—Jer. 31:34; Isa. 11:9; Ps. 96:13 ■