

The Good News of God's Judgment

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[0 : 00] For many Christians, the whole idea of God's judgment is something that is uncomfortable, something that's embarrassing when people bring it up, and something that most Christians I know altogether avoid if they can help it. Over the years, as I've talked to people who are not Christians, this is one of the things they point to when they say, that's why I would never consider such a faith. The idea that there is a God out there who's going to judge everybody. That's not what the world needs. And it sounds to most people, when we talk about this, so judgmental to talk about a God of judgment. Now, what's interesting about that is that if you look at the Bible and all of the references to God's coming judgment, the vast majority of these references are positive.

In other words, God's people all throughout history in Scripture are shown as longing for God to bring judgment, praying for God to bring judgment. It's something that they yearn for when they look at the brokenness of the world. The judgment of God is what causes people to shout for joy. It causes the trees of the field to clap their hands. In short, in the Bible, we see that God's judgment is good news for the world. So, obviously, there's some misunderstanding here. Either the Bible has misunderstood judgment or we have misunderstood judgment. And so, we're going to look more closely at God's judgment by looking at this passage in Revelation. This is the vision or series of visions that God gives the Apostle John. And we're here in our study of Revelation at chapter 20, verses 11 through 15. This is God's vision of the final judgment. And we're going to see three reasons why God's judgment is good news for the world. So, let's pray and then we'll open the word together.

Lord, we thank you for your word. And we thank you that there are parts of the word that are immediately comforting and immediately inspiring. There are places in your word that give us a vision of how to live life. But we also thank you that there are parts of your word that are challenging to us, maybe even offensive to us. One of the things that shows us is that this isn't entirely written by us for us, but that it's written by you for us. And there are things that you know we need, Lord, even if we do not. And so, we pray that we might sit under your word and that through it we might actually encounter your living word, Jesus Christ, because we know that he is the one we most need. And it's in his name that we pray. Amen. So, God's judgment is good news for the world. Why? Why would this be something that Christians long for and celebrate throughout history? Well, the first reason that we see in Revelation 20 is that God's judgment shows us that our actions matter.

It shows us that our actions have meaning. There was an article in the New York Times a few years ago, I don't know if anybody saw it, but it was from a philosophy professor. And he, to his great dismay, discovered that his son's second grade class was teaching that there was no such thing as moral truth.

[3 : 29] So, any moral valuation, saying that it's right to be honest, saying it's wrong to murder an innocent person, anything that has language like right or wrong, good or evil is considered opinion. No such thing as moral fact, no such thing as moral truth. And the philosophy professor says, you know, most of the professional philosophers that I know would not fully agree with this, and yet this is a part of the common core curriculum that's taught in the majority of schools throughout our country. There's no such thing as moral truth.

And I think many people at a popular level would agree with this sentiment. I think most people love the idea of morality as a kind of personal preference, you know, kind of like wine tasting. Some people prefer this kind of morality, some people prefer that kind of morality, but it's all within the realm of personal opinion. And I think most of the time when people say that, it's because they're thinking of their own life. And they're thinking of their own choices. And they, frankly, don't want anyone else to feel like they have the right to tell them what they can or cannot do. And you know,

this is understandable. Nobody likes to be told what to do by somebody else. But I think when we think that way, we're thinking on a personal level. Now, think about society as a whole. And think about the implications of this for society as a whole. Because if we say that morality is entirely a matter of opinion and personal preference, and if there's no ultimate right and wrong, what that means about our actions is they're essentially meaningless. Right? They're meaningless. I mean, you may think it's right to do this,

I may think it's wrong, but there's no real meaning involved. It's all just opinions. And so if we say that, then when it comes to society, we have to say that each society has to decide for itself right and wrong. So you say, okay, we have cultures and societies all around the world. Let's just let every society decide what is going to be right and wrong for that society. That should make everything work fine. I say, fair enough. But what about an issue like slavery? Right? If we say that there's no moral truth, then we cannot say that slavery is categorically wrong. What we have to do is we have to say, okay, well, we leave it up to the societies of the world, the cultures of the world, to decide for themselves whether or not slavery is okay. Is it right or is it wrong? Is it legal or is it illegal?

And in fact, what you see is that many societies around the world throughout history have decided that slavery is totally fine. And the reason is pretty practical. It's because slaves make for very cheap labor. And so slavery is very beneficial to any nation that wants to build wealth and power. The means of production with slavery is hard to argue with from an economic standpoint, right? So this was the chief argument in support of slavery in Britain. The pro-slavery people were saying, if you abolish slavery, the British economy is going to collapse. And so the question is, how do you argue against something like that? How do you mount an argument for something that's actually bad for your nation? There's only one way. William Wilberforce was a Christian and he was one of the leading abolitionists against the slave trade in Great Britain. And here's what he says at the end of his argument. He presents this argument at the British House of Commons and he lays out some reasons why slavery or, you know, abolishing slavery may be good at a political level. But then here's what he says at the end. Policy, however, is not my principle and I'm not ashamed to say it. There is a principle above everything that is political. And when I reflect on this, believing the authority to be divine, how can I dare to set up any reasonings of my own against it? When we think of eternity and of the future consequences of all human conduct, what is there in this life that should make any man contradict the dictates of his conscience, the principles of justice, the laws of religion, and of God? You see what he's saying there? The reason that we should abolish slavery is not simply because it's good policy. It's because there's a standard of right and wrong. There's a standard of good and evil that sits above every human standard. It sits above human opinion. It sits above politics.

[8 : 22] And by that standard, slavery is a violation. Slavery runs against the grain of the created order.

And of course, when he talks about the future consequences of all human conduct, he's talking about God's final judgment, which we read about in Revelation 20. Right in Revelation 20, John sees books that are all of the things that are all of our thoughts, all of our feelings, all of our choices. It's all there. It's all written down. It's all accounted for. And what this shows us is that all of our actions are recorded and will be judged. And God will evaluate them based on his standard of good and evil, which is what the Bible calls righteousness. And you know, this may be a hard pill to swallow. When I think about my own life, that I can't just do what I want. Right? That one day I will be held accountable for everything that I ever thought, felt, said, or did. That's a hard pill to swallow. But it also means that no government can create totalitarian laws. It means that Christians have a foundation from which to challenge totalitarian governments on the right and on the left, as they have done throughout history. It means that there is a law that sits above human law. It means, as Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. beautifully articulated in his letter from a Birmingham jail, it means there's such a thing as an unjust law that doesn't accord with God's law. And in those cases, when we encounter such laws, we have only one option, and that is civil disobedience.

It may be a hard pill to swallow at a personal level, but what it shows us is that when it comes to something like slavery, we can point to it and say, that is categorically wrong. And that's not just my opinion. That's a fact. The good news of God's judgment is that our actions matter, and there is such a thing that God's judgment that God loves this world. And that's good for the world. The second reason why God's judgment is good news is that it means God loves this world, that God

loves this world. He loves every human being that He has made. You know, years ago, I was in Rwanda in a place called Niamata, and I was standing in kind of a cool, dark room, and the room was filled with metal shelves, and the shelves were stacked with human bones. Bones of men, bones of women, bones of small children. You could tell by the size of the skulls. Some were very small children, even babies. The Hutus and the Tutsis had lived together for years and years and years in Rwanda in perfect peace, next to each other, working together, going to school together, living in the same villages side by side. But in 1994, the radical Hutus suddenly turned on the Tutsis, and so men and women and children were slaughtered with guns and machetes. They were herded into schools and churches for mass executions. In some cases, even pastors and priests took part in the killing. It was like the whole country had gone mad. Roughly a million people were killed in about a hundred days. So if you dislike the idea of a God of wrath, if you prefer the idea of a God who's simply willing to overlook all the bad stuff, I don't think you've ever been to Niamata.

[12:08] A God who could watch something like the Rwandan genocide or the Jewish Holocaust and then just sweep it under the rug, that's a sociopath. Not worth our time, certainly not worth our worship.

What we need to understand is that God's wrath is the flip side of God's love. Imagine creating your greatest work of art, your magnum opus, and then imagine pouring yourself into that art as God did with human beings. Anyone who defaces God's masterpiece, which you are, anyone who defaces God's magnum opus comes under God's wrath. That's because God loves his creation. So even when we're the ones defacing ourselves, God is right to be angry because that's what love does when something like that happens.

It grows wrathful. Right? So when the genocide broke out in Rwanda, despite their pleas for international aid, countries around the world, including the U.S., simply looked the other way. It was too much.

We had other more pressing issues. So people turned away. But the good news of God's judgment is that God does not simply look away. Because he loves this world, because he loves every single human being in it, God does not look away from such evil. He responds. That's the good news of God's judgment.

Right? So God's judgment shows us that our actions matter. It shows us that God loves this world, that wrath is the flip side of love. But the third reason that God's judgment is such good news is that it means true justice will be done. True justice will be done. Jeffrey Epstein, some of you are familiar with the story, was a millionaire who was recently arrested for allegations of trafficking, abusing, and raping young girls. And he was arrested and he was in jail awaiting trial and he committed suicide in a New York jail before he could go to trial. And his suicide, as many of you know, has sparked waves of outrage. Because now that he's dead, people say justice cannot be done. He's escaped. Justice. Jenna Lisa Jones is one of the women he allegedly victimized when she was just 14 years old. And listen to what she said in an interview. She says,

[15:04] I'm extremely mad and hurt, thinking he once again thought he was above us. And he took the easy way out. He's escaped judgment. But then listen to what she says. But God will have his judgment now.

God will have his judgment now. Now, I don't know what her religious background is, but I can tell you that this sentiment is extremely common among victims of violence and abuse. Years ago, when I worked with and counseled victims of childhood abuse, every now and then I would meet with a person with a religious background. But this was in Boston. A lot of people there had left religion behind. But when you talk to victims of such violence and abuse, the most comforting idea is the idea of some ultimate judgment. Right? Because even if the person was caught and arrested and tried and sentenced, there's still a sense in which that can't make up for the damage that was done. That it approximates justice. But it can't ultimately, ultimately bring a sense that justice has truly been done. Right? The only comfort for victims like Jenna Lisa or any of the other people who've experienced such horrible things is that God might someday judge those people who escaped justice in this life. Because frankly, we live in a world where if you're rich enough or powerful enough, you can escape justice. You can bribe somebody or pay somebody off or hire a bunch of amazing lawyers.

You can flee the country. If all else fails, you can take your own life. But Revelation chapter 20, verses 11 and 12 says, From the presence of God's throne, earth and sky fled away.

Right? So in our world, you can flee from justice. But you cannot flee from God's justice. The throne room encompasses all of creation.

There's no place you can go to escape the throne room. All the world becomes the great throne room. And then it goes on to say, And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne.

[17:23] As I said before, in our world, if you're great, if you're rich and powerful and have influence, you can escape justice. If all else fails, you can take your own life.

But when God brings judgment, the great and the small stand equally before the throne. And God is even able to raise the dead for judgment.

And this is good news. Because frankly, and I don't think I have to convince you of this, the human capacity for evil goes far beyond the human capacity to exact justice.

Right? We'll never catch up. This was the problem in Rwanda. What do you do in the aftermath of the genocide when a certain amount of peace has been established and people are calling for justice, and you look around, and the majority of the surviving population are perpetrators?

You literally cannot imprison all of those people. And if you kill all of those people, if you execute them, you won't have anybody left. So what do you do? Right? The human capacity for evil far, far outpaces our capacity to bring any kind of justice.

[18:34] The good news is, as the bones of Nehemiah cry out for justice, as victims of violence and oppression cry out for justice, God will answer.

God will answer. And one day this says, even death itself will be judged and cast into the lake of fire, and evil and suffering will be no more.

Now that is where you can put your hope. That is a hope that will not let you down. That is a hope that will lift you up even in the darkest of times. So for all of these reasons, God's judgment is good news for the world.

But of course there is one remaining problem. God's judgment is good news for the world, but is it good news for us? Right? Me as an individual.

Because on the one hand, we said that God loves every single human being that he has made.

Every single one of you is God's magnum opus. But on the other hand, it says all of our actions will be recorded and judged by God's standard.

[19:38] And it says the true justice is that nobody is above the law. Nobody's above the law. And the hard truth that we have to swallow is that when you look at God's standard, and then you look at your own heart and your own life, what you realize is that no matter what has been recorded in those books about our lives, no human being can ever live up to that standard.

Right? No human being can attain to that standard. And this is where Christianity starts to become utterly unique. Because, you know, all religions have some version of that stack of books.

I mean, all religions have that stack of books. And all religions say that at the end of time, you know, when you die, when your time is up, the record of your deeds is going to be looked at.

And if the good deeds outweigh the bad, good things happen. And if the bad deeds outweigh the good, bad things happen. All religions, you know, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, they all have some version of that.

And even for non-religious people, this is how the world works. You know, we live in a karma world. You do good things, good will come back to you.

[20:53] You do bad things, bad will come back to you. You know, it's all a great meritocracy. It's certainly this way in D.C. Ultimately, you look everywhere else, and there's some version of this.

Your worth is determined by your works. You know, in D.C., you're only as good as your resume.

You're only as good as your best accomplishments. But the gospel is utterly different, because only the gospel says, there's another book.

There's another book. Verse 12, then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And you say, well, what is the book of life? It shows up a number of times throughout Scripture.

In Luke chapter 10, Jesus' disciples go out, and they do all these amazing things. You know, they go, and they do all of these good works for God. They go, and they preach Christ boldly.

They go, and they heal the sick. They go, and they cast out demons. And then they come back to Jesus, and they are thrilled, and they say, that was amazing. Look at all of the things we did. Even the demons are subject to us in your name.

[21:54] And Jesus, you know, you expect that Jesus is going to say, good job. I told you you could do it. Go and do more. Well done. I'm so proud of you. But that's not what Jesus says.

Jesus says, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you. But rejoice that your names are written in heaven. And this is sending a point home loud and clear.

The only thing that matters in the end is not all of the good things that we might have done for God. And this is a room full of amazing people. And you guys have done a lot of amazing things in the world.

But this is telling us something that we need to listen to. At the end of the day, what matters is not all the great stuff we think we might have done for God. I mean, the funny thing about Luke 10 is, the only reason they were able to do any of those good things is because of Jesus.

Because of his name. What matters in the end is not the good works you did for God, but whether or not your name is written in the book of life. Everyone who's put their faith in Jesus Christ will have their name written in that book.

[22 : 59] And here's what that book means. If your name is there, then when you stand before the throne of God, you're not going to be judged based on your record, based on what is written in that stack of books.

You're not going to be judged based on that. It's as though God will take your resume and just set it aside. And instead, you're judged based on the record of Jesus' works.

An entirely different resume. His good works, his obedience, his faithfulness. That will be the standard by which you are judged. That will be your resume.

And Jesus' willingness to take our sin on himself when he died on the cross. And the good works that he lived out, his faithfulness given to us as our own record.

Because of that, we have hope of entering into the new heavens and the new earth. And this is where Christianity is utterly unique. Other religions say, your salvation is based on what you do.

[24 : 07] Only Christianity says, your salvation is based on what Jesus has done. Completely different. So all of this shows us why God's judgment is such good news for the world.

Actually, unparalleled news. And you know, coming back to the beginning, understanding God's judgment as we've just talked about it, actually makes you a less judgmental person.

The more you understand it, the less judgmental you will be. Because on the one hand, we do believe that our actions matter. We do believe that there's such a thing as right and wrong that is not a matter of opinion, that is an objective fact.

And yet, we would never dare look down on somebody else for the choices that they've made. We would never dare think ourselves above anyone in this world. Because we know that the only way we will survive judgment is that God sets our record aside and looks at Jesus' record.

And that's profoundly humbling. It means we have no right to brag, no right to boast. Even our best works, even our best accomplishments, our only hope is that that's set aside.

[25 : 19] So our hope rests not in our own moral excellence, but in God's mercy. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you again for the gospel.

We thank you for the profound hope it offers us. We thank you that there is another book. We thank you that we can seek to serve you and seek to live lives of holiness, boldly knowing that we will fail.

And knowing that in the end, it's not a matter of the good outweighing the bad. It's a matter of Jesus accomplishing something for us on our behalf that cannot be taken away. I pray that that would be the hope that we share, that unites us, the hope that we proclaim to the world, and the hope in which we pray, sing, and come to your table together.

In your son's name, amen.