

# Hell and Judgement

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[ 0 : 00 ] While we continue our series, it's the second, is it penultimate in the series of significant theological words. I've got to tell you that of all of them, this is the one that's kept me awake at night to be thinking about presenting to you.

Not because judgment is hard to understand. God says in his word that he set a time when he would judge the living and the dead. Some will go to be with him.

Many will go to hell. Guys, that's not a hard concept to understand. But it's a really hard concept to accept. It's such a challenging topic that this area of people being judged and potentially going to hell is sometimes called a defeater belief.

Which means that it's a truth that defeats people. For people who aren't Christians, it's often the reason I cannot believe in God. I cannot believe in God, they'll say.

I cannot believe in a God who would send people to hell. Judgment is such a heavy issue that it has an effect on us Christians too.

[ 1 : 14 ] For us, it's the truth I avoid even though I believe. The one we avoid in conversation, the one we avoid even thinking about day to day.

It's just offensive on so many levels to us from our own personal perspective. There's no way to sugarcoat judgment either. I don't have any marriage illustrations that are going to make hell sound any more pleasant than it's going to be.

But we can't sugarcoat it. And we shouldn't. But even as I say that, what we do need to do is actually look at judgment in its proper context.

And in its proper context, one of the things that we'll find is this, the way that God actually enacts judgment is actually beautiful in its own right.

And even before we get to that, there is actually common ground that we have with our friends who aren't yet Christians, even as we discuss judgment. For example, we are all, without exception, wired to be like God.

[ 2 : 24 ] Genesis 1, verse 26 tells us that we above all other creatures are made in his image. So we will find common ground even with things like judgment. Justice, for example, is a common ground.

We share right and wrong as common ground. I'd even go so far to say that we share the concept of evil as common ground.

Maybe we don't define it quite the same way. But we hate unfairness, inequity, corruption, bullying, exploitation, abuse. We crave justice.

So much so that if we don't get what we believe justice to be, we'll take it into our own hands. What do you think fuels gossip and slander? What drives these social media rants that just seem to take over our Facebook and Twitter feeds?

Our justice can be savage. So even as I say there are points of commonality, there are significant points of difference. Justice is something that we in this society define in relation to ourselves, not in relation to God.

[ 3 : 37 ] Remember what Dave was talking about when he talked about sin in his talk on sin? Dave Bott? He talked about sin being not letting God be God. People don't talk about right and wrong in that sense.

Justice is something that we define in relation to ourselves. And justice is something that we apply to others, not ourselves. And yet the beautiful thing about God's justice is that God applies it to himself, not us, should we only trust him.

So friends, what I want to suggest is for any conversation on the difficult topic of judgment, we need to actually understand two truths. And the first one is this. Justice is built into who we are.

We understand right and wrong. Like I said, maybe we differ. Like, maybe we differ a little bit on the details, but we understand in general terms. Justice is built into who we are.

And grace is the only foundation for which justice actually works. That's when justice really sings. So let's have a look at judgment and see if we can get a bit more of an understanding of what's going on in that and how grace actually fits in.

[ 4 : 51 ] I've actually picked John chapter 18 verses 1 to 11 because this saving judgment, this gracious judgment is actually a central theme, both in John's gospel and specifically in this particular part of John's gospel.

It's front and center at this point. I mean, it starts out, looks like a betrayal story, you know, where Judas is actually going to betray Jesus. But it's far more than that. The whole thing very quickly, if you noticed, as John read it out, the whole thing very quickly turns on its head.

The key to seeing and understanding the goodness of God's judgment is to focus, as we go back through this passage, is to focus on the man, the cup, and the cross at the other end of it.

And the first thing we discover is that the man is more. This man is more than he seems.

Judas has left the meal in the upper room. That's in John 13, 26. Jesus has had done some more teaching with his disciples. He's prayed for them. And during that time, Judas has been very busy.

[ 6 : 03 ] He's gathered a group of soldiers, we read in verse 3 in this passage, and he's come back to betray Jesus, to take them to Jesus so he can arrest them. And you read this scene and you kind of wonder what kind of people Judas would have felt safe behind.

Do you think about that? He's seen miracle after miracle performed by Jesus. Who could he possibly feel safe with? Well, it appears he did the best he could.

He chose the best he could find. He went and found soldiers and temple guards. Think fully armed.

Think state-of-the-art weaponry. Think SWAT, SAS, or Navy SEAL in our terms.

This is the kind of group of people that Judas has tried to put together. And yet, when they come for Jesus, something extraordinary happens. Well, first thing, Jesus approaches them.

It's not the kind of thing you do in the dark in the middle of a park like that. They didn't have park lights like we have. He approaches them and he asks them, what are you looking for?

[ 7 : 08 ] And they said, Jesus of Nazareth. And you read in your Bibles that it said that Jesus' response is, I am he. And if you look at the footnote, John actually read the alternative translation of that, which is simply, I am.

And as he says that, all these burly soldiers just scatter everywhere and fall over like tenpins. If it wasn't such a tragic betrayal of friendship and trust, this would be a comical scene.

The man that is supposed to be the one that's being arrested by these soldiers, suddenly he reveals himself as I am and everyone just scatters all over on the floor.

And the clue to what's happening is in those words that Jesus uses to describe himself. You see, when he says, I am, he is saying, I am Yahweh. He's identifying himself as the covenant God of the people of Israel.

But those soldiers came to arrest a man and they encountered God. And as the story unfolds, it continues to be almost comical in the sense that God is, or Jesus, he calmly helps them back onto their feet and get back on the track.

[ 8 : 26 ] Come on, what were you here for again? Tries to gather them, gather their wits, get them back on their feet. And when he repeats the question and they respond, he sets the conditions for what will then happen next, which they comply with.

And he goes with them and his disciples are set free. The man is far more than a man.

And that's a significant thing here. We're talking about God in human form, dictating the circumstances of what happens next. The next thing I say, we have to focus on the cup.

And the cup is the key in terms of what Jesus is doing. See, the reason Jesus gives for actually going with these people is actually the cup. Remember how in chapter 18, verse 11, Peter gets violently pulled out a sword and cuts off the ear of one of the high priest's servants.

Jesus sticks it back on again, heals him. But he actually stops him from carrying on and taking the other ear off and doing more damage with these words. He says to Peter, put your sword into its sheath.

[ 9 : 38 ] Shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me? This cup is the key. It's an Old Testament metaphor that's full of meaning for the Jews.

But interestingly, this metaphor actually has two possible options to it. And they're both absolute extremes in meaning. One, it could be the cup of God's wrath or judgment. Or the other is that it could be the cup of blessing or grace and mercy. I'll give you an example in Isaiah 51, 17 of the cup of God's wrath. In verse 17 of Isaiah 51, we read these words. Wake yourself, wake yourself, stand up, O Jerusalem. You who have drunk from the hand of the Lord the cup of his wrath, who have drunk to the dregs, the bowl, the cup of staggering. The cup of wrath represents God's rightful judgments. On the other hand, in Psalm 23, 5, you might remember this verse.

[10:44] We read, You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows. The cup that overflows here is actually, that David is describing, is the cup of God's blessing.

It's described as his goodness and mercy, which pursue him all the way through his life in the next verse. So we have two cups, the cup of wrath on the one hand and the cup of blessing on the other. And Jesus saying he's intending to walk away with these soldiers and drink one of them. Now, if we piece these things together, we can get a sense of what's going on.

The story of the Bible unfolds something like this. So we put it into the sort of larger narrative of the Bible. And we get this. God created the world and us in it. He did it specifically to show us his goodness.

And he did. Even as the world is now, it is awesome. Think overflowing cup of blessing. But the first people that God created decided to do life without God, to turn away from God's goodness and sin at its heart, as Dave described, was not letting God be God.

[12:07] And humanity has continued this way ever since. I think this is one thing that we can actually agree on with our friends who aren't yet Christians. Yeah, I don't live God's way. I don't acknowledge him at all. Some of them will even say he doesn't exist.

But God is still God and we are still his creatures. So instead of blessing, that cup of blessing, we deserve God's judgment, the cup of wrath. And we do experience something of both of these in life, don't we?

The beauty and the goodness of God is still present in the world, but not quite as it was intended, frustratingly short of what we really desire. We now live in a time of brokenness.

And yet God desires to show his goodness. And that breaks in when we see the promise to Abraham in Genesis chapter 12.

He promised Abraham that he would bless him and that through Abraham all nations would be blessed. And they established a covenant. All Abraham and his descendants had to do was trust God at his word and this blessing would come to them.

[13:21] If they didn't, there would be consequences. And against all convention and expectation, God actually signed that covenant. Just to give you a sense of, I've talked with you about this before, but some of you may not have heard it.

But in the ancient Near East, the way things worked was, if there was a covenant being decided between two people where they make vows to each other, what happened was they cut a bunch of animals in half and laid them out in a row.

And if they were of the same rank, then they would both walk through the animals, the center of the animals, and say, may it be to me as has been done to these animals if I do not keep my covenant to you.

But if there was a difference in the rank, then only the lower ranking person walked through those animals and recited that. But if you look up Genesis 15, what we discover is that God makes a covenant with Abraham and his descendants, promises blessing to the whole world through those descendants.

And yet he is the one who goes through it. He is the one who signs the covenant, so to speak. That means that he is both the judge and the one to be judged if this covenant fails.

[14:40] If Abraham's descendant fails, God himself will bear the consequences. It's scandalous. Totally unfair. But it's just.

And it turns out that even God's people were unfaithful. He couldn't bless the world through them. They deserve the cup of wrath, not blessing. And how much more do we deserve that cup? And that is why when we come to John chapter 19, we hear Jesus declaring that the cross is the completion. Jesus is God come to drink the cup of his own wrath.

As he promised to Abraham, he suffered for our failure. In his life, he fulfilled the covenant on our behalf.

And in his death, he fulfilled the judgment on our behalf. The cross is the completion of the covenant. At the cross, Jesus drank the cup of God's wrath.

[ 15 : 51 ] And that's why his last words are just so important. In chapter 19, verse 30, he said, It is finished. And he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

It's not just a sigh of relief that its death has finally come to him. It's a declaration. A declaration that it's done.

Jesus drank deeply from the cup of wrath so that we could drink deeply from the cup of blessing. Jesus described how this would work in John chapter 3, verses 15 to 17.

And in John 12, 31 to 33, and several other places as well in John, he explains what he's doing as he heads toward the cross.

Early on, he says these words. I've got it from chapter 3, verse 14. And as Moses lifted the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

[ 17 : 05 ] For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Can you see the intent there? The intent of God is to relentlessly pursue the salvation of his people. He is a just God and will not let any sin go unpunished.

Same God. God is relentless in his pursuit of blessing his people. It's important at this point as well to understand what judgment looks like.

It looks like true justice. And that justice requires that we all drink from one of the cups. So we choose.

Which do we choose? God is perfectly, relentlessly just. But he is more than that. He is merciful.

[ 18 : 20 ] Remember, if you do, if you're not very Bible-rich, I think it's Genesis 35, is it? When Moses actually asks if he can see the face of God and God says, well, you can't do that and live.

So I'll give you an alternate version of that, you know, a polarized version, shall we say. I'll protect you in a rock, I'll pass by you, you'll get to see the back of me. And as he does that, though, he declares who he is. And he declares that in his very nature, he is both just and merciful.

And because he's both just and merciful, Jesus drinks the cup of wrath for us.

And now by believing in him, we can drink deeply from God's overflowing cup of blessing. We can move from experiencing wrath to experiencing mercy. This is the judgment of God.

It can only be understood in its right context, and that is at the foot of the cross. If judgment is offensive to you, go to the foot of the cross and observe judgment from there.

[ 19 : 29 ] So even as I speak about understanding judgment, and I hope that's helping you to get a sense of what judgment is about, we still have the issue of facing judgment.

And a natural way to think about facing judgment is to kind of push it into the future as a future event. And it is. But it's so much more than that. Let me start by looking at judgment past and saying that for believers or Christians, whichever tag you like to use for yourself, if you want, judgment is a thing of the past.

We've already been judged in Jesus and justified or declared righteous in him. In John chapter 5, verse 24, and in chapter 8, verses 50 to 51, Jesus says, this is from John 5, 24, truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes in him who has sent me has eternal life.

He does not come into judgment but has already passed from death to life. When we put our faith in Jesus, we no longer have to drink the cup of God's wrath.

Jesus has done it in our place, as I've said. I'm going to keep saying this on repeat. And that's in part because I need to hear it myself. But I think you do as well. Jesus has done it in our place.

[ 20 : 57 ] So judgment is a thing of the past for us who believe in him. We will one day stand before the judgment seat of Christ but not to be judged but to be held accountable for how we have lived.

We can confidently say that we have already passed from death to life. That's judgment passed.

Then there's judgment and how we need to bring that into the present.

You see, even though we know that judgment is a past thing for us, there can still be this lingering doubt for us. We keep on coming across areas of our lives that we just won't let God be God of.

So how can he possibly accept us? If he actually knew what was going on in my heart and my mind, how would he possibly accept me? Friends, he knows. But the problem is that we confuse the status of our relationship with the state of our relationship.

Or as Calvin puts it, our union with Christ with our communion with him. I'll stick with status and state. I don't know if you read Calvin much, so I'll stick with status and state.

[ 22 : 04 ] See, the status of my relationship with God is based on what Jesus did on the cross. It's done. It's indisputable. It cannot get any stronger or any better. The state of my relationship, though, is based on how I engage with that God in relationship.

Am I prayerfully dependent on him? Am I actively trusting in his promises to me, listening to his words, seeking to grow in Christlikeness? I'll give you an example.

My marriage status is determined by the vows I made to Joe, that Joe and I made to each other. That's the marriage status, is based on those vows. But the state of our marriage depends on a number of things in terms of how we engage with each other relationally.

Like how often I use Joe in sermon illustrations without checking with her first. Number. So here's where the confusion comes in.

When the state of our relationship with God slips, we can mistakenly think that our status with God is in danger. We can think that our lack of discipline, our struggle with persistent sin, our lack of passion for God endangers our salvation, but it doesn't.

[ 23 : 34 ] When we drift in our communion with God, even if it's into sinful patterns, it does not affect our union with God. It grieves him deeply.

And if we go down that path unrepentantly, then we should question whether we can have any confidence that we are saved in the first place. But if this is something that we're aware of and that's pricking our conscience that we're struggling with, then I don't think we're in that category.

So when we drift in our communion with God, it doesn't affect our union with God. We are still his dearly loved children.

I've got to say this. Judgment is real. You've got judgment past, judgment present, and judgment future.

That judgment is real. Jesus says that he will be the judge of the living and those who have already died. And he speaks about this in John 5, verse 28. He says, Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.

[ 24 : 58 ] Jesus says, God's wrath is coming. Not even death is an escape. And let me just make clear here that when he says those who have done good, the only good he's required in this particular section of John is that we actually believe the Father and believe in the Son.

So it's not actually a list of do's and don'ts that he's expecting here when he says good. He's expecting us to abide in him. Those who do abide in him bypass judgment.

And those who don't accept Jesus' death on their behalf will have to face it on their own. The living and the dead will be judged and judged according to belief in Jesus.

So what do we do with this? What do I do with this?

I'm going to suggest to you what I do myself which is learning to tell myself the story of the man who is more, the cup that's the key and the cross that's the completion. I tell myself this story over and over again throughout the course of any given week.

[ 26 : 18 ] If you're a Christian and death and judgment are areas you avoid thinking about then tell yourself this story.

If your conscience burns within you for things that you've done way in the distant past like I experience time and time again I tell myself this story.

If you know a degree of personal brokenness that means you sin repeatedly and shamefully and just feel helpless within it come back to this story.

If you think you're unforgivable tell yourself this story. And friends if you're not a Christian and death and judgment are issues for you then consider this story.

Apply it to yourself. We all want justice but only at the foot of the cross can we truly face the justice that we know in our hearts we desire.

[ 27 : 32 ] because it's there that we see God's judgment at work and it's there we see his goodness on display. It's there we see justice exercised with grace and mercy.

It's there that we see the God who drank the cup for us. Let me pray.

Father God we thank you for being just. It scares the heck out of us Lord but we thank you for being just because we know that we need it.

We know we desire it. We know life world the community we live in is so lacking in it that it hurts. And yet we also know that we can't face justice not true justice because as much as we see the problems around us we know that they're actually in us too.

And so we thank you for applying your justice with such graciousness. We thank you for sending the son to drink the cup of wrath so that we can drink the cup of blessing.

[ 28 : 53 ] We thank you for giving us life where death once ruled. Amen.