

JUSTICE AND JUDGMENT

By

Curtis Dickinson

“Thus said Yahweh, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him that glories glory in this, that he hath understanding, and knows me, that I am Yahweh who exercises loving-kindness, justice, and righteousness in the earth: for in these things I delight, said Yahweh” (Jer. 9:23-24).

It is only as we trust God to be absolutely just and faithful to His laws and promises that we can have a relationship with Him. Because we believe Him to be just we can have faith that in Christ and his atoning death we are justified before God.

When God created Adam and Eve and placed them in the garden of Eden He informed them of the law by which they should live, and the just penalty for breaking that law. “And the Lord God took the man and put him into the Garden of Eden to dress it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, of every tree of the garden thou may freely eat, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil thou shall not eat of it; for in the day that thou eat thereof thou shall surely die” (Gen.2:15-17).

This was “capitol punishment,” which many people today think is so terrible that they seek to legislate against it.

However, it is not severe enough, according to what is widely taught regarding the final punishment of sinners. This traditional teaching holds that the punishing will be endless, that after death of the body, the spirit or soul must live on forever separated from God, the giver of life, suffering in anguish and utter hopelessness, knowing that there will be no relief coming – not ever!

But was this the penalty God announced? Surely the One who is the very essence of justice and righteousness, as well as mercy and goodness, would not lie about the penalty for breaking His Law! Had there been the least danger that anyone might be subjected to the horrendous penalty of endless punishing, justice would require that this be made known in the clearest manner. Such danger to His children should be announced in language that no one could misunderstand. A God of love and justice would see that every person would have a plain and definite warning which could not be mistaken.

The law was revealed, and the penalty clearly stated but can we find any way to interpret the penalty as endless punishment? God said, “In the day thou eat thereof thou shall surely die,” which is a long ways from saying, “After the death of the body, thou shall be subjected to the torments of in endless hell.”

The penalty is further described as God pronounced the sentence in Genesis 3:14-19. The Serpent is cursed and the ground is cursed, but not Adam or Eve. Instead God said, "For dust thou art and to dust shall thou return." They found that the wages of sin was death.

Here at the opening of the great drama of human life on earth the law is given and the penalty for breaking it is stated and then applied. It is impossible to acknowledge God as just and righteous and at the same time believe that He would pronounce one sentence for breaking the law, but impose another one, so horrible as endless suffering, upon the unsuspecting law-breaker. Who can believe that a just ruler would deal in such a deceitful way with his subjects? And who can believe that the Holy and Righteous Father would deal so treacherously with His own children? The Bible is filled with examples of the law given and broken, and the penalty exacted: the Flood Sodom and Gomorrah, the rebellion of Korah, and so many more. Yet in all the inspired story there is never any warning that the sinner would be subjected to endless punishing.

God's justice and judgment are demonstrated for all mankind and for all time in the death of Jesus. Isaiah said that He would die, not for any sins of his own, but for ours. "He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities...all we like sheep have gone astray...and Jehovah hath laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isa. 53:5-6).

Sacrifice is a prominent part of the Old Testament, especially the sacrifices of animals, in which the guilt and sin of the offender was transferred to the animal by the laying on of hands, and then the animal was put to death. As Hoeksema says, "All this proves very plainly that the sacrifices of the Old Testament were designed as typical of the one sacrifice of Christ as a substitution for the sins of the people of God" (*Reformed Dogmatics*, Reformed Free Pub. Assoc.). The animal was not tortured but slain, as a type of the death of Jesus. It was only after its death that it was subjected to fire, not as a token of torture, but as a means of total consummation; not for preservation but for elimination. For fourteen hundred years Jehovah had portrayed the penalty for sin as death, with never so much as the least hint that endless punishing would be added to that penalty. To annex such a penalty after all those years, without ever having made it known, would be an injustice worthy of the worst tyrant. Certainly not to be expected of the one who "delights in justice and righteousness" (Jer. 9:24).

As portrayed by the animal sacrifices, Jesus took the full penalty for sin and "tasted death for every man" (Heb. 2:9). He met all the requirements for the perfect sacrifice. (1) He was without sin (Heb. 4:15); (2) He was born of a Roman (Gal 4:4), of the same flesh and blood as those whom he came to save (Heb. 2:14); (3) He willingly gave his life: "No man takes (my life) from me, I lay it down of myself" (John 10:18); (4) The apostles went out preaching that Christ had fulfilled the "things foreshadowed by the mouth of all the prophets" (Acts 3:18).

Paul expressly wrote that we are justified before God by what Jesus did in dying for us, because God is both just and the justifier of them that have faith in Jesus (Rom 3:26).

Is there some further penalty for sin? Death is exactly what God has decreed for sin from the first warning to Adam: “Thou shall surely die (Literally = “in dying thou shall die”). The prophets warned, “The soul that sins, it shall die” (Ezek.18:20). If the judgment upon the sinner is not death but a prison sentence of unending suffering, then in what sense could Jesus possibly have met that penalty and satisfied the justice of God by a few hours of terrible agony on the cross which ended in the giving up of his life? To uphold the traditional view many answer that Christ’s death was a mystery, or that since he was God’s son, his six hours of suffering would equal an eternity of suffering for a sinner. Of course, there is not one scripture to support such ideas, and they forget that the penalty was paid in his death, not in the suffering that preceded it.

Jesus himself explained that his death demonstrated the judgment that is to come upon the unredeemed. He said, “Now is the judgment of this world” (John 12:31). And John then explained that he said this with regard to his death.

The center of all history is Christ, and the focal point of Christ’s work is in his death, burial and resurrection, which Paul declared to be the good news by which we are saved (I Cor. 15:1- 4). The good news of Christ’s death for sin must be consistent with what the penalty for sin is. If we are to proclaim the good news that Christ died for us, then let us be consistent and also proclaim that the unredeemed will suffer death for sin, not endless punishing, as so many teach.

This is not to say that there will be no suffering in the final destruction and death of the sinner. Surely there will be sorrow and weeping by those who have rejected salvation. There will be gnashing of teeth due to anger and hatred just as the Jews gnashed their teeth at Stephen before they killed him (Acts 7:54). But the final punishment will be the loss of life as seen in the Passover Lamb, and as seen in the death of Jesus when he laid down his life for his own. It is called “eternal punishment” because the death will be final, complete, and eternal.

If the penalty for sin is endless suffering, not death, then who has paid that penalty? Not Christ, for the Bible says that “Christ died for our sins” (1 Cor 15:3).

Why destroy the simplicity of the gospel by imposing other meanings upon it which are contradictory to that which is portrayed in Scripture, and which also reflect upon the character of our just and merciful Father in heaven?

“For the wages of sin is death: but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom. 6:23).

.....
Copyright © Curtis Dickinson. Formatted and Posted by Ken Fortier Ministries. Permission is hereby granted by Mrs. Regina Dickinson to reproduce and distribute Curtis’ articles to as many as possible. This statement is to remain attached to this article for permission to be valid. Vol. XXXVIII, Number 8.
.....