

And Then Judgment

Hebrews 9:27-28

A sermon for a Sunday toward the end of the Pentecost Season

At this season of the church year we look at “the last things.” What happens at the end? This means we proclaim Christ as the Almighty, but we also consider judgment and hell and the final sorting out of everything.

Hebrews 9:27 says it is appointed for all to die and then comes judgment. We know, however, that judgment and hell aren’t taken very seriously in the modern world.

There are many jokes about judgment and hell and many involve meeting Saint Peter at the pearly gates and bargaining with him. Judgment becomes a joke.

You also have heard the one about the grade school class that was having a special program for their parents. Five students each held a placard with a letter to spell out H-E-L-L-O, but the kid with the “O” got mixed up and stood at the beginning of the word instead of the end. What a laugh!

When we hear about how seriously judgment has been regarded in church history, we say: “How could that be?” One of the greatest theologians in this country, Jonathan Edwards, preached a sermon in 1754 called, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” He preached about judgment and wrath and hell. It was the beginning of the First Great Awakening. We look back at this as an historical curiosity.

In 1953 a leading theologian in Norway, Olaf Hallesby, said: “There is a hell and there are people in it.” The general reaction was to scoff at him.

Today if someone asks: “Do you believe in hell?”, the Christian answer is: “No, I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.” But that answer says something about what happens at the end, and that’s what we have to look at.

It is commonly understood that if Christians talk about hell today, it is regarded as a trick played by the church to keep people in line. Better be good, better go to church. It’s a whip. The general thinking is if you are sophisticated enough, you know that’s out of date.

If you go back to the ancient Iranian religion, Zoroastrianism, which existed before the Old Testament, we find ideas about hell that later entered into Hebrew thought. These ideas of hell in Zoroastrianism also spilled over into the religions of India.

Ideas of hell can also be seen as psychological hang-ups. Most people today think that judgment and hell are psychological ways in which people get even with others. That is to say: "That person will surely go to hell. That person will surely face judgment."

Someone did a survey asking people whether they believed in hell. Over 80% said "Yes." The second question was: Do you think you could go to hell? Only 16% said: "Yes." If there is a hell, it is really for other people, according to this way of thinking.

We have the idea that nice people don't go to hell, but the idea that Christianity is about niceness is a fatal mistake.

What does scripture say? "And just as it was appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him." (Hebrews 9:27-28. In Hebrews 9:27 the Greek does not have the definite article "the" before the word judgment.)

Scripture also says: "There will be those who go eternally to hell, and there will be those who go eternally to heaven" (Matt 25:46). In Romans 5:20 Paul writes: "Sin abounded but grace abounded more." Some say that that means that eventually everybody will be saved.

How do we sort out these problems? This is not a time for humor but a time for serious thinking.

We begin with 1 John 4:7 "God is love." No question. Blunt. It goes on to spell out what it implies. God is love. But God's love does not include sin. God does not love sin because this is Holy Love. There is no way that God can tolerate sin.

What is basic is God's love. What has God done? God has sent his Son to die and rise again. And the promise is that Christ has taken our place, and we have taken his place. That is called the Happy Exchange (Luther, 2 Cor 5:17). God has taken away the final judgment by dying on the cross. For those who are in Christ the final judgment is not a problem.

We tend to say sin isn't so important. We imagine that God is a benevolent Father who pats us on the head: "That's alright. It doesn't matter. I forgive you. I'm bigger than all that." It becomes a kind of cheap grace, a kind of sentimentality.

Any time that we fall into the trap of saying: "Well, so what?", the answer is that sin is so serious that God sent his Son to die on the cross and rise again.

The wrong way of approaching what God has done is to say: "Well, when God sent his Son to die on the cross, it was play-acting." The medieval theologian Abelard said that on the cross God was just play-acting. He gave us an example of how he loves us and shows us also how to live.

What happens in the cross and resurrection is that God truly becomes involved and changes everything. We can't just dismiss this as "a primitive, backward view of God; it's just a matter of how you think about it." This is what God has done, and it's the center of our Christian faith.

But the flip side of the promise is that those who are not in Christ, there is no promise. That does not mean I believe in hell or I believe in the devil because I believe in Jesus Christ. But the flip side of the promise is those who are not in Christ but who have stayed in their sins have a real problem.

That doesn't mean that we say about any individual that that person went to hell or that person went to heaven. We have to leave that up to the Lord. Our job is to bring the message of salvation in Christ to each one.

The fact is that because of the horror that people can be left forever and forever in their sins and they choose to do that, we have all kinds of images of the terrible judgment and the terrible things of hell because there is no promise for those who are outside of Christ.

That is why in the Unitarian Church and also in the Jehovah's Witnesses there is something called annihilation. Those outside are just annihilated. The hope is the empty hope of oblivion, of nothingness.

We face two temptations. The first temptation is to say: I'll just hide in a corner and maybe God won't notice: "I just won't pay any attention to that." That really amounts to hardening one's heart and letting oneself live on a superficial level. This is terribly dangerous because it is a vain attempt to escape reality.

The other temptation is that we could fall into hopelessness and despair thinking that we are damned, and there is nothing we can do and give up. That's a temptation of the evil one because in Jesus Christ there is salvation.

Our calling is to bring the message of freedom and salvation. For those who are in Christ, the judgment has already been taken care of by what Jesus Christ has done on the cross and in the resurrection. Amen