

January 14, 2007

Living Without A Dread of God's Judgment

Romans 8:12-17 / I John 4:13-18 / Job 19:28-20:29

It's been a long time since we heard from our old friend Job — 3 months and one week to be exact! And although some of you may have thought we were done with Job, the truth is we merely took a break from Job to focus on Healing, Thanks-giving, Advent, Christmas, and the Post-Christmas Stories of the Wise Men, and the Deaths of all the Male Children in Bethlehem.

Yet today I'd like to return to our trek through Job. Partially because I have NEVER, in my 21 years as a pastor, started a book without finishing it (including Isaiah which was 24 chapters longer than Job)! And partially because some of the material, though it may seem a little bit repetitious, is too rich in wisdom and spiritual insight to pass over merely because some of it sounds repetitious.

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After all, if we believe the Bible is inspired by God, then we must believe He inspired that repetition for a reason. That the repetition itself is part of the message God wants us to learn from.

For instance, one of the things we learn from it is that when human reasoning reaches it's limit (yet pride refuses to admit it has reached it's limits), what people usually end up doing is exactly what Job's friends do in these chapters — say the same thing all over again, except a little more forcefully, or passionately. They turn up the volume a few notches and say it a little louder, hoping that where their intellectual arguments failed, emotional forcefulness will prevail to persuade the listener to accept their position.

Have you ever noticed how people do that? How they use anger and emotional intensity to drive home some point, or persuade their opponent when their intellectual reasoning fails to do so? They don't say anything new, they just say it louder! And with more emotional forcefulness (even threatening forcefulness) hoping that the other person will back down or give in merely out of the fear of an emotional confrontation.

Husbands do it with wives / fathers and mothers do it with children / politicians do it / military officers do it / employers and employees both do it, and yes, believers who hold to one theological opinion do it to believers who hold to a contrary theological opinion. At some point probably everyone does it.

I even remember one occasion in Honduras where I walked in to a Drug Store and had to wait for a prescription to be filled. It was a family-owned business and all the employees were family members. And as I stood there half listening and half not listening to the conversation, it was near impossible not to realize that the wife, and sons were trying to understand why they had to do something which the dad required, but they thought was either irrational or unnecessary. And the dad responded once or twice with answers which obviously didn't satisfy either the wife or the kids. And so the third time, being unable to give any good reason as to why they should do what he required, he exploded and yelled at the top of his lungs, "Porque yo soy el padre — eso es porque!!" ("Because I'm the father, that's why!")

And that was it! The whole conversation ended, and no one dared say another word! I even found myself feeling uneasy asking if my prescription was done! (And I wasn't even a part of the argument!)

It was such an emotional explosion, that everyone simply returned to their work. "The tension was so thick," as they say, "you could have cut it with a knife!" I couldn't wait to get out of there! But it's not an uncommon ploy — when reason fails revert to emotion. Say the same thing again and again, louder and louder until the opposition backs down! (Actually don't do that! That IS what Job's friends do, and as that incident in the drug store shows, it does work on occasion. But it's not the right or wise path to follow!)

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You see, you already learned something new from the repetition! Something that shows how true to life this dialogue really is! Lessons to be learned apart from the lesson of what is actually said!

The repetition itself is actually part of the instruction we need to learn from!

But that's not the only thing I want us to focus in on today. What I want to focus on today is the thing that both amazes and irritates Eliphaz, and Bildad, and Zophar as well — Job's seeming lack of fear in relation to standing before God in the judgment.

In an almost uncanny way (at least to Job's friends) he seems to be without fear of God's reprisal. He accuses God of having wronged him (19:6), ignored him (19:7-8), attacked him and knocked him down without reason, making sure he doesn't get up (19:9-12). God, he says, has made everyone (including his wife) despise him (19:13-20).

And then after asking his friends why they pursue him as God does (v. 21), he bursts into the confident declaration that he wishes his words were recorded on a scroll, or engraved in rock forever. And in the context he probably means the words he spoke asserting his innocence and his feelings that he hadn't done anything to merit such sufferings — at least nothing anyone else hadn't done.

And he says all that in connection with his unshakable conviction that his Redeemer lives, and that in his flesh, after he has died, he will see God (v. 26) — and he obviously means On The Day of Resurrection, which in Scripture is always connected to the Day of Judgment.

And he doesn't simply say that he will see God then. He says he wants to see God then — his heart yearns for it! He can't wait for the Day of Resurrection and The Day of Judgment to come! The day when every last human being will be raised, as Paul says, "to stand before the judgment seat of Christ and give an account of everything we have done in the flesh."

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Instead of fearing or dreading the coming Day of Judgment (as all his friends do) Job looks forward to it! Something that confuses the heck out of his friends, because if they were Job, and suffering as he was (which from their theological understanding would mean they had done something horribly evil) they would be shivering in their boots!

Mike Mason puts it well when he says:

"How intriguing it is that Job, even while his tragic circumstances have induced in him a fresh fear of God, never exhibits the least fear of God's judgment. On the contrary he clings more and more to the very thought of judgment, and is actually eager to see it through, being somehow fully persuaded of the shielding power of his faith. His friends are so busy terrorizing him with threats of the judgment hanging over his head that they fail to see that this is precisely what Job yearns for! They cannot fathom that he does not see his Judge as being "judgmental," but rather as defending the rights of His people. Why should Job not look forward to a time when all the hidden facts of his case will be brought to light and when divine justice will take its course with him? As he himself admits, "No godless man would dare come before Him" (13:16). Job's sole protection against the wrath of God is his settled conviction that only the very unleashing of this wrath will ever bring him the vindication for which he longs. Surely this is the hallmark of the highest faith. To the mature saint the inexorable judgment of the Almighty is not something to be dreaded or evaded, but eagerly and even jubilantly anticipated. As Psalm 96 states: 'Let the sea resound and everything in it; let the fields be jubilant and everything in them. Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy before the Lord, for He comes to judge the earth' (vv. 11-13). Why is God's judgment an occasion for such delirious rejoicing? Because, as the final verse of that psalm states, 'He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in His truth.' " Job wants to stand in the judgment of God because he knows the judgment will reveal his innocence.

It's the same type of attitude I witnessed not long ago on a documentary chronicling the plight of a man unjustly convicted of rape. I don't recall all the dates and details they shared, but in the 1980's

a teenage girl had accused this man of raping her to avoid the shame of a pregnancy out of wedlock. She picked him out of a line-up, made a compelling scene in the courtroom, and the man was sent to jail.

Then six years later she became a Christian at a church in New Hampshire and felt that as part of her conversion she needed to right her wrong. So she confessed to police that she had “set him up.” But the court didn’t believe her!! They came up with all kinds of psychological reasons as to why the old story was true, and she would make up her new story! So the man stayed in jail — until, in the 1990’s, DNA testing became precise enough to test the semen stains.

The convicted man’s lawyer (apparently not totally believing her new story, nor his clients innocence), advised him NOT to have the test done. “If it comes back positive,” the lawyer said, “you’ll go to jail for the rest of your life.” “Bring it on,” he essentially said. “I want it!” And in the end the DNA test proved he was innocent. It was the ultimate test of justice and judgment — yet he welcomed it because he KNEW that it would vindicate him! Job was the same.

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What about YOU? Do you, like Job’s friends, fear the judgment of God? Or, like Job, do you look forward to it with calm and even joyous anticipation, believing that you (like Job and that man), will be vindicated on that day?

That’s what I want to pursue with you today. Paul says, “We will ALL (even as believers) stand before the judgment seat of Christ to give an account of the things we have done in the flesh.” How does knowing that affect you? How should it affect you? Job seems to imply (along with Ps. 96, Rom. 8:15-16, I Jn 4:17 and other passages) that true believers can face it calmly and confidently — even joyously anticipating it.

But how about unbelievers? Hypocritical believers? “Carnal Christians,” as they are sometimes called? What about them? Or what about earnest believers who know how truly sinful they are, know the sins they continue to commit, and can’t seem to overcome them? What about them? Should they view the judgment as calmly and confidently as the believers who are blameless and upright in their walk?

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You see, I’ve been in the pastorate long enough to know that everyone reacts differently. Long enough to know that some who don’t fear the judgment at all should be trembling in their boots and pleading for mercy with their faces in the dirt. While others, who do fear the judgment and dread it with all their hearts, should lift their heads in faith to see the approving gaze of God. Some who are NOT concerned at all should be, and some that ARE TERRIBLY concerned should not be!

Long enough to know that the unshakable confidence of some rests upon a flimsy foundation that God will tear to shreds, and the dread of others stems from a misunderstanding of the Gospel which they have embraced (yet fail to fully understand).

So let's consider where YOU stand, or how your heart or conscience reacts to the truth that you (along with everyone else — both believer and unbeliever ) "will stand before the judgment seat of Christ to give an account of EVERYTHING you have done in the flesh," or in this life...

EVERYTHING!

Everything you have done in public and private. Every thought you have entertained, every word you have spoken, and every thing you have done — even the secret or hidden things, as Solomon tells us — the things that only you, Satan, and God know about. How does knowing that all those things are known by God, will be exposed, and judged by Him, sit with you?

Because what I've found is that with most people it doesn't sit well with them. And their responses range anywhere from a slight uneasiness, to an unsettled nervousness, to an unshakable anxiety, to a deeply imbedded fear, and even in some cases, to an outright dread — one missionary friend of mine even waking up from a dream he had before he was converted, trembling with fear and drenched in sweat, and realizing he needed the pardon and shelter from God's wrath that Christ alone could offer!

But what I've also found is this — that because the threat of impending divine judgment does not sit well with most people — they seek to ward off those anxious feelings, and fearful thoughts, and that outright dread by embracing some type of Gospel message. Some, like my missionary friend and myself and many or most of you here, dealt with the knowledge of impending judgment by believing the Gospel proclaimed in the Bible and turning to Jesus in faith. But many have not and will not. Yet that doesn't mean they don't have a "gospel" they turn to in order to deal with the problem of the divine judgment.

Nearly everyone I know has a "gospel they believe" which shields their conscious as well as unconscious thoughts against the fear of what Mason called, "the inexorable judgment of the Almighty." For some it IS the biblical gospel, but for others it's a gospel of their own making.

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a.) The most popular "gospel" used to ward off the fear of divine judgment is the GOSPEL OF DENIAL. It's a gospel which denies the fact that God judges at all. Such people do believe in God, but they erase from God's being the divine attributes of justice, wrath against sin, hatred of evil, or anything to do with punishment of sin.

Neale Donald Walsh verbalizes this type of “gospel” in his best-selling book “Conversations with God,” where speaking as God he says:

“There is no judgment in the afterlife. You will not even be allowed to judge yourself... No, there is no accounting, no one giving “thumbs-up” or “thumbs down.” Only humans are judgmental, and because you are you assume I must be. Yet I am not—and that is the great truth you cannot accept.”

And in another place he writes,

“Everything is acceptable in the sight of God, for how can God not accept that which is?... You have no obligation. Neither in relationship, nor in all of life... [an understandable comment coming from a man whose been divorced 3 times!] Nor any restriction or limitation, nor any guidelines or rules. Nor are you bound by any circumstances or situations, nor constrained by any code or law. Nor are you punishable for any offense, nor capable of any — for there is no such thing as being “offensive” in the sight of God... Hitler went to heaven. When you understand this, you will understand God.”

What’s he trying to do? Soothe people’s concerns, anxiety, or fears about the biblical teaching of an impending judgment by trying to convince them that God has no such plans, no standards of right or wrong, and not even a hint of wrath against sin! No justice, no rules, no guidelines, not even any moral suggestions — no keeping track of sins, and thus no basis for judging anyone!

No divine proclivity in God to judge whatsoever.

It reminds me of a friend I had in seminary who after a year of living in an apartment off campus tried to share the gospel with his landlord. The man, who was nominally Episcopalian, listened for a moment and then stopped my friend mid-sentence and said: “You’re not one of those Christians who believes that God judges people, are you?” The obvious implication being that if he was, the man didn’t want to hear anything more from him.

People who have embraced the gospel of denial are often like that. It’s an attempt to dispel any worries or fears they have, or may have had in regard to the judgment, but denying it will ever take place. Yet, as they will eventually find out, denying reality does not change reality. It may soothe the conscience, and calm the nerves, and alleviate fears, and prevent dread, but just like the drug addict who shoots up to escape the harsh realities of life, it doesn’t stop them from crashing in upon him once again whenever the high of the drug wears off.

I can deny all I want that I will ever age and have to prepare for retirement. But the smartest option is to admit it and take the necessary steps to prepare for it. The same is true for the Day of Judgment.

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b.) Another alternative “gospel” is the GOSPEL OF UNIVERSALISM. It doesn’t necessarily deny the reality of a possible judgment, nor does it try to do away with the attributes of divine justice and wrath against sin in God. It simply says that God’s mercy will ultimately win out over His wrath, and that in the end He will save everyone.

In fact, Universalist’s originally (many, many years ago!) taught that all people would be saved, NOT because they were good, and NOT because God didn’t hate sin or kept no track of sin. But rather (they said) it was because Christ died on the cross for EVERYONE, and because He shed His blood for EVERYONE (thus atoning for the sins of EVERYONE) EVERYONE will be saved — whether they respond to the Gospel in faith or not! Whether they are regenerated, repent and believe in Jesus or not. Since Christ died for ALL, ALL will be saved. There may be a judgment but no one condemned to hell. All will be exonerated.

And since universalistic thought took root most firmly in New England, its resultant effect has jokingly come to be called, “The Fatherhood of God, and the Brotherhood of Man, in the Neighborhood of Boston.” There is no need to turn from sin and look to Jesus in faith, since all will be saved regardless of who they are, what they believe, or what they do. A gospel, which like the gospel of denial, can only soothe people’s concerns about the impending judgment by asking them to reject enormous amounts of Scripture which declare that we must embrace Christ and the Gospel by faith and turn from our sin if we are ever to be saved from the wrath to come.

The fact that Jesus called His disciples to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth, and that Paul and the early church even bothered to evangelize and spread that message at the risk of their own lives (because they obviously understood that salvation comes by faith, and faith comes by hearing) is enough to assure us the universalistic gospel is false.

If Paul and the early church believed everyone would be saved anyway — regardless of who they were, what they did, or what they believed, they wouldn’t have risked their lives to spread a message that no one needed to hear or believe anyway!

No my friends, what drove the heart of Paul was a love for people, and a desire to see them saved – a salvation that came by hearing, and believing the Good News about Jesus Christ (Romans 10:14-21).

c.) Another alternative “gospel” is the GOSPEL OF MERIT. It is probably the most commonly accepted gospel among religious people. And its message is this: “God will accept you and pardon you if you do enough good things to outweigh the bad.”

This is the category Job’s friends fall into. They believe God takes sin VERY seriously, and they believe God unquestionably judges people for their sins —sometimes very severely (and almost exclusively in this life).

But they also seem to think that what saves one from God’s wrath in judgment, or causes them to be subjected to God’s wrath in judgment, is the accumulated MERITS of their own personal righteousness and good deeds, or the accumulated DEMERITS of their own unrighteousness and evil deeds.

Everything in this scheme is weighed in the scales, and those who weigh in more heavily on the side of good deeds will be spared the judgment of God, whereas those who weigh in more heavily on the side of evil deeds will be subject to the judgment of God.

It’s a belief system that enables people who think they’re doing well to relax (at least while they think they’re doing well!) and leaves all the others in utter despair. Yet in reality it leaves everyone (even the super-achiever) ANXIOUS and UNSURE — especially those who understand that in the sight of God even our best deeds are like sin-stained rags, and thus unworthy (as they are) of anything but demerit. Unworthy of anything but the wages of sin, which is death, and ultimately leads to judgment.

But there IS HOPE. The Scripture does declare that all people everywhere will one day be called to stand before the righteous Judge of all the earth to give an account for all the things they have done in the flesh. / “God,” says Solomon, “will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether good or evil.” That is the unavoidable truth.

Yet we are also told how we can be SAVED from His wrath against sin on that day. How we can be SO SURE of being EXONERATED, and found NOT GUILTY of all the charges against us, that we can look forward to and even joyously anticipate that day.

HOW? By believing the only true Gospel. The Gospel of God’s grace and forgiveness in Christ. The Gospel we are called to embrace by faith, and then stake all our hopes and confidence before God upon.

d.) Its the TRUE GOSPEL OF THE SINNERS HEAVEN SENT SUBSTITUTE, who came to LIVE for us, and in our place, the LIFE of perfect obedience to all God's commands that we never could — and then DIE for us, and in our place, the DEATH we rightly deserve for all our sins and transgressions of those same commands — thereby making God both JUST and the JUSTIFIER of those who have faith in Jesus.

When we trust in Christ, God credits to us all the righteous merits of His life and all the atoning benefits of His death. And thus being counted righteous and reconciled to God for Jesus sake, "Our Heavenly Judge," as Calvin once put it, "becomes our Father, Redeemer, Advocate, and Friend."

Not Someone who will judge us, but Someone who will defend us against all the accusations anyone can throw up against us! "All his sins have been covered," God will say. "The penalty for each of her sins has been paid," He will say. "He cannot be punished again for sins that were already punished in Jesus," He will say! "The minute she trusted in Jesus, she was freed from any and all condemnation forever," He will say!

Which means the person who believes in Jesus will find God on that day to be their Advocate — Standing with them, Defending them, and Pleading their case in the courtroom of heaven!

That's why the person who believes the true Gospel (like Job) need no longer fear the judgment!

NOT because it will not take place, and NOT because God intends to save everyone anyway. And DEFINITELY NOT because people can somehow do enough good things to outweigh the bad! / But because BOTH the perfect obedience we needed, and the atonement for all our sins that we needed was already supplied for us by our Redeemer, who will be our Defender and Advocate on the Day of Judgment.