

# Escaping Judgment

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Chron. 7:12-20; John 5:21-29; Romans 8:28-39



Judgment, hell, and condemnation are standard concepts in the way we speak of the gospel. Our heritage would remind us that we cannot speak of salvation without mentioning hell as the destination from which we must escape. Baptists have long been known for preaching as much about hell as we have preached about heaven. If this has been true in rural Virginia, it has been just as true on the mission fields around the world.

The Gospel of John is often touted as the most evangelistic of the gospels. It is the favorite Biblical book to translate and distribute around the world under the banner of missions. Perhaps it is because John is so clear on the message of God's love and salvation. Perhaps it is because John contains so many of those celebrated passages as Nicodemus and the woman at the well. For whatever reason, John is the foremost gospel on the list for translating into a new language. Why is it, then, that John has so little to say about hell and judgment?

I was caught off guard upon noting that John's gospel contains no direct reference to hell. John has three passages that reference judgment, and these are balanced with statements of redemption. John does not overlook the fact of judgment, ignoring it as though it were not there. John does not sidestep the issue of weighing the eternal consequences to our decisions regarding Christ Jesus. At the same time, he seems far too preoccupied with the good news of Jesus to give much energy to hell, judgment, and the wrath of God.

Jonathan Edwards' famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," sets forth a popular Baptist mindset of God's wrath and judgment as central to the gospel message.<sup>1</sup> His perspective is perhaps more characteristic of our human predisposition to wrath than John's presentation of redemption in Jesus. While Edwards emphasized justice and condemnation, John's gospel emphasizes God's love and desire to redeem. While Edwards stressed God's just anger at human sin, John's gospel stresses God's gracious will to forgive in an offer of grace.

This kind of grace is hard to grasp, for we are much more attuned to demanding punishment and retribution for wrongs. It was this aspect of human nature that Moses' code of "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth" addressed. Moses' concept was to limit retribution. Jesus' gospel went further. He taught forgiveness with no strings attached. That kind of grace is hard to grasp—harder yet to employ.

Jesus speaks of trusting God as the key to escaping condemnation. Believing or trusting is in no way repayment for wrongs we have done. Trust does not make reparation for misdeeds. Trust is merely the acceptance of God's love and grace poured out in Christ Jesus on our behalf. This is what faith is all about. It is taking hold of God's grace and forgiveness that we might rejoin God in fellowship.

What about God's anger and wrath so justified in light of our unrighteous attitudes and actions? Is God not justified to cast us into hell for grieving His will? Is God not free to punish us for our gross disobedience in whatever way He deems appropriate? Does God as Creator not have the right to do

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<sup>1</sup> Edwards, Jonathan. "On Deuteronomy 32:35: Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God", sermon preached 08 July 1741, at Enfield, Connecticut. Posted online at <http://www.jonathanedwards.com/sermons/Warnings/sinners.htm>.

according to His will with the unrighteous creatures that we are? We would have to concede Edwards' point as far as God's rights and righteousness. It is God's character that we misstate.

Paul clarifies this character issue for us in Romans 8. He questions who there is to accuse those who have trusted God for salvation. Christ Jesus would have all the right, but He is the one who died on our behalf. He was the priest officiating his own sacrifice to plead our case before God. The very Spirit of God intercedes for us with sighs too deep for groans. Jesus spoke of the Father as sending Him to give his life on our behalf. Who is left to accuse us?

God has come to our side in all grace with the express purpose of offering redemption. There is nothing left for us to do in this interchange. We are called on to do nothing other than to accept God's wondrous display of grace, forgiveness, and love. Trust is all that is left for us to do.

There is no sacrifice we can make to become deserving of God's self-sacrifice on our behalf. There is nothing to do to overcome God's wrath, for in Jesus Christ God set aside any claim to wrath at his own initiative. All creation is subject to the Creator, therefore, nothing created can stand in the way of God's love and grace—nothing save one—our unwillingness to accept and trust.

Jesus' words here in John speak to this one issue that would separate us from God's love, grace, and forgiveness. It is the question of our trust. We need not earn God's trust. We are powerless to change our standing before God by any means. It is God who has granted a change for our standing. We simply need to learn to accept and trust God's provision, care, and love.

“If my people who are called by my name shall humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and heal their land.” These words of promise to Solomon, centuries before the coming of Christ Jesus point to this same character of God in desiring to forgive and restore. It has always been God's desire to live in fellowship with humanity. It has ever been our history, however, to flee from God in fear of wrath, retribution, and our own sense of guilt.

God, however, has always been ready and willing to forgive. It has ever been God's desire to bring broken humanity into his own presence and fellowship. Too long have we attributed to God our own anger and desire for retribution. Too often have we characterized God by our own lack of character and grace. Would that we might learn to accept God's gifts of love and grace, learning to offer the same to those who abuse, harm, and offend us as we have so often offended God.

Escaping God's judgment is really a simple matter. Perhaps the harder issue for us is to escape our own propensity for judging and condemning others. It is one thing to accept God's forgiveness and grace for ourselves. It is quite another to offer that same grace to others.

Moving from judgment to life in God's eternal presence is a simple matter. God has made all the preparations. We need only accept in humility. How will we share this message of hope in this Do-It-Yourself world? God's tears and groans for humanity are not shed in anger or wrath. They plead for our humble acceptance of God's love and grace.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*