

The Ultimate Destiny

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Matthew 25:31-46

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In Michelangelo's painting of the Sistine Chapel, the entire wall (48' X 44') behind the altar contains the artist's interpretation of the "Last Judgement." Christ the Judge stands at the upper center surrounded by saints and apostles with the Madonna under his raised right hand. With hand gestures the righteous are called into heaven as the damned are directed toward the underworld at the bottom of the painting. While the work was in process, Cardinal Baigio da Cesena, a papal master of ceremonies, complained that the ill clad figures did not belong in such a holy place. Michelangelo responded by painting a portrait of Baigio with donkey ears and a snake coiled around his body as one of the judges of the underworld. When Baigio petitioned Pope Paul III for removal of his portrait, the pope quipped, "I have no jurisdiction over hell." Baigio's portrait remained for posterity. After Michelangelo's death, however, the Council of Trent ordered appropriate coverings to be added to the nude art in Churches including the Sistine Chapel.

The "Last Judgement" chosen by Michelangelo for the altar wall of the Sistine Chapel portrayed Christ as a terrible judge. Roland Bainton's biography of Martin Luther *Here I Stand* notes that Luther's mental image of Christ common to the Middle Ages was often portrayed in the Church as the Righteous Judge with a sword on his left and a lily on his right: (p. 30) "Every one of those now dead would some day rise and stand with the innumerable host of the departed before the judgment seat to hear the words 'Well done,' or, 'Depart from me into everlasting fire.'... Luther had seen pictures such as these and testified that he was utterly terror-stricken at the sight of Christ the Judge." A contemporary of Michelangelo, Luther's early view of God could be summed in a word—*fear*. Although the Reformer did not abandon the New Testament picture of an ultimate destiny for saints and sinners in the final judgment of God, the centerpiece of the Reformation was a recovery of the God of grace. Salvation was by a direct personal response to the grace of God through faith in Christ, rather than by the authority of the Church.

Do we need to fear God? Many of us have grown up under the Old Testament declaration, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Psalm 111:10, Proverbs 9:10). We might have heard from the pulpit that the terror implied in the word *fear* should be interpreted as *reverence* for God, acknowledging biblical references to God's loving-kindness, forgiveness, mercy, and grace. Yet, the idea of a final judgment, an ultimate destiny separating saints and sinners, has never been lost from the Christian vocabulary or from orthodox Christian theology. In learning to speak "Christian," do we need to abandon the whole concept of a last judgment or just to follow Luther's modification toward a more gracious image of God? It seems that the church has always found some use for the emotion of fear as a motivation for behavior modification.

I was discussing the problem of suicide with a friend who was a professional counselor working at the Baptist Hospitals in Louisville. He noted that the Roman Catholic view of suicide as a mortal sin, thus, beyond any hope of redemption sometimes comes up in conversation with extremely depressed people. I asked if he believed that to be true, and his response was, "No I don't, but I don't mind if someone contemplating suicide believes it." My friend had found a place for fear in his work, and a similar use of the fear of hell has been a tool of Christian theology throughout the ages.

The famous sermon of Jonathan Edwards "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," first preached on July 8, 1741, in Enfield, Connecticut, is often credited as the catalyst for the first Great Awakening in America. Edwards called sinners to repentance with a mental image of sinners in the hand of God dangling like a worm over the fires of Hell. Although the nearsighted Congregationalist Puritan pastor read his sermons from a manuscript held in front of his face, his audience was so shaken in fear that the very pews trembled with anxiety over the prospect of God's judgment on sinners and the eternal fires of hell. Apologists for the Great Awakening note the "halfway covenant" that allowed children of lax church members to hold partial membership in the church without evidence of a conversion experience. The Great Awakening called sinners to repentance in fear of the God of Judgment. The element of fear continued into later revival movements. Billy Graham came to Houston about 1952. I remember riding in car pools from my suburban church to attend many of the services, and I also

recall Graham's warnings about hell and fear stories that moved people to the altar. Edwards would have been proud.

My early church experience especially in the annual church revivals played on childhood fears. I came to resent the emotional manipulation of children, especially vulnerable teens who were burdened with guilt over thoughts and feelings that are common to all of us. As I grew toward adulthood, my faith gravitated away from the terror of hell toward the God of love demonstrated in the example of compassion exhibited by Christ. I came to an early conclusion that we do not find God in our fear. If you have no place for God's grace, you really have no place for God in your life.

I was a pastor in Louisville when the Halloween Hell Houses became popular in churches. I had a visit from a sixteen year-old boy who had seen a movie on hell at his cousin's church and sought out his mother's pastor for counsel. The boy was visibly shaken by the movie. He had never been active in church, so the Hell House was his only image of God. At the time, his father was ill and unable to work; he died with a heart attack the next year. I tried to expand his vision of God to focus on the love and grace of God in Christ. After his baptism and his father's death, he had no further interest in church. I take that as my failure as much as his. But I was more convinced than ever that fear is not the pathway to God.

You may recall the "scared straight" fad in high schools a couple of decades ago. Teens were taken on a tour of local prisons to hear the testimony of terror from prison inmates and to witness for themselves the horror of prison life. I seriously doubt that people are "scared straight," by the image of an angry God, especially in light of the alternative views in the Bible.

In 1996, an evangelist claimed to be responsible for the conversion in prison of the "Son of Sam" serial killer David Berkowitz. I recall reading at the time of his arrest, that Berkowitz, Jewish by birth, had been converted at the Beth Haven Baptist Church in Louisville while he was a soldier stationed at Fort Knox about five years before his arrest in New York City. Beth Haven was also the church that provided the Hell House experience for my young friend.

The last judgment, the final word of God, is a human cry for justice in a world filled with experiences of terror and injustice. The cry of Psalm 13:1-2 became the prayer of the Civil Rights Movement: "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me for ever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?" The cry is familiar to anyone who has been the victim of the "powers" in this world so opposed in the letters of Paul. Since the drama of Job, the ancient Jewish theology of evil and suffering based on immediate justice has not held up. The image of the Flood, in which God acts in history to destroy the evil and to preserve the good does not work out in experience. The Jews gravitated toward a theology of hope in which ultimate justice must be the final act of a holy God. At the time of Christ, Jesus stood with the Pharisees both in hope of eternal life and in the teaching of a last judgment. The Son of Man sayings in the Gospels are rooted in the Jewish expectation that God will break into history through the agency of the Son of Man, identified in the Gospels with the Christ, and will establish justice on the earth.

The final discourse of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel, also known as the parable of the Last Judgment, reflects the vision of hope in the teaching of the Pharisees and Jesus that the ultimate destiny lies beyond the present experience of the iron-fisted rule of Rome. The judgment is an act of division of sheep from goats, good from evil, along with the image of the Kingdom for reward and an eternal punishment. It is presented in symbolic language, the common biblical language about the division, the judgment, between good and evil, the establishment of justice on the earth. The Judgment is too significant in the Bible to ignore, but it is always loaded with images that do not correspond to a simple, literal interpretation.

Our human sense of justice seems to demand punishment. With 743 prisoners per 100,000 people, did you know that the U.S. has the highest documented prison ratio in the world, higher than Russia and Rwanda, who fall second and third? We have a few flaws in our system. People who are poor or black are much more likely to be jailed than if you are wealthy and white. But the primary problem is that punishment does not end crime. Capital punishment, killing killers, does not stop killing. What we accomplish is a satisfaction of the human need for revenge. I recall reading a

passage from Tertullian from the second century. He offered some comfort to Christians experiencing persecution by the Roman authorities with the ultimate hope that Christians will one day be sitting in the audience, like the Colosseum, watching the Romans tortured in hell. I cringed at the early Christian satisfaction that seemed to come from revenge.

But consider the constant theme of vindictive justice in violent TV drama. Why does the public enjoy reading about the cyanide death and cremation of Hitler, or the beheading of Saddam Hussain, or the recent detailed account of the shooting of Osama Ben Laden? The sadistic drive for revenge fits the dark side of human life, but it fails to meet the high level of divine grace. Paul calls Christians in Rome away from revenge with the quotation from Deuteronomy, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."

The cry for judgment from God is a deep longing for justice on this earth. But maybe we do not really want justice as much as we want mercy. If justice is done, can any of us stand as people of absolute purity before the holy God of love? I still rest my faith on the center of centers in the word about God: "God is love." Nothing more, nothing less, and nothing instead can adequately describe the nature of our God. As followers of Christ, we believe in the God of universal love, who called us to love our enemies, to be angry and sin not, and to speak the truth to one another in love—attitudes that were set by the example of Jesus our teacher and Lord.