

Isaiah 1:21-31  
The Grace of Judgment  
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There have been numerous efforts in history to destroy the church of Jesus Christ. One such effort was by the Roman Emperor Diocletian, and he thought he had succeeded. He had two monuments raised in Spain. One had inscribed upon it these words: “Diocletian Jovian Maximian Herculeus Caesares Augusti for having extended the Roman Empire in the east and the west, and for having extinguished the name of Christians, who brought the Republic to ruin.” On the second monument were inscribed these words: “Diocletian Jovian Maximian Herculeus Caesares Augusti, for having adopted Galerius in the east, for having everywhere abolished the superstition of Christ, for having extended the worship of the gods.” Diocletian was very mistaken. Far from being extinguished by his persecutions, Christianity was then in the process of spiritually conquering the Roman Empire. Jesus had predicted that the gates of hell would not prevail against His Church, and He, of course, was right.

Yet the greatest threats to the church through the ages have come not from without but from within. The greatest threats to the church have not been from the persecutor at the gate but from the traitor within the gate, from those whom the hymnist called the “false sons within her pale.” Inner corruption such as heresy and worldly immorality is a greater threat to the church than violent attacks from without. Yet the church will survive these threats from within as well.

In John chapter 15, Jesus explained how He would preserve His church from destruction by false sons. Here is what Jesus said:

John 15:1-2

- 1 "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser.
- 2 "Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit."

Jesus here compares the church to branches on a Vine. He is the Vine, and God the Father is the vinedresser. When the branches begin to consist of too much dead wood, the Father visits them with the shears of judgment. The branches which bear no fruit are the branches which do not abide in Christ. If they were truly abiding in Christ, if they were truly partaking of the sap of His special grace, they would be bearing fruit. Their barren sterility proves that although they are outwardly a part of Christ's people, they are not so inwardly. They have no living faith and no true, vital covenant union with Christ. They are "in Christ" only by profession. God uses the shears of judgment to cut them off. They are removed in judgment from the church, if not in this life then in the life to come. The branches which do bear fruit are those who do abide in Christ. They are members of the church inwardly as well as outwardly, their faith is real, and their union with Jesus is a vital, life-giving bond. God uses the shears of judgment not to cut them off but to cut them back, to prune them. God uses affliction for the true Christian's spiritual benefit, to enable him to have a stronger, even more vital spiritual union with Jesus, and thus to enable him to bear even more spiritual fruit through abiding in Christ.

Our passage today at the end of Isaiah chapter one has a similar message. This passage is a lament about the sad state of Judah at that time in redemptive history. The church was then filled with spiritual traitors, and it appeared that this inner corruption was going to overwhelm God's people. Yet the prophet tells us that God was going to save Judah through the shears of judgment which God would use to cut off the false sons within Judah and to cut back or prune the true sons within Judah.

We will look at our passage under four points: the Judge, his verdict, his mercy and his justice.

We will begin by looking at the Judge, who is described in verse 24. This is perhaps the longest designation for God found in the prophecies of Isaiah. God's names are a revelation of Himself, and His names here reveal His sovereign, irresistible power. He is the Lord, the supreme master and authority. He is the Lord of hosts, Lord Sabaoth, the Lord of armies. He has at His beck and call the innumerable hosts of heaven, His angelic armies. He is the Mighty One of Israel, the Strong One who has been associated with Israel since He protected the patriarchs.

When we see the church in a state of corruption, we should grieve but not despair, mourn but not give up all hope. When the waves of doubt threaten to engulf us, we should take our focus off our circumstances and meditate upon God's wisdom, love and power. If only we could see the spiritual dimension of life with our physical eyes, we would see that the hills which surround us are covered with flaming chariots and the angelic

hosts of God Almighty. When the forces of hell seem about to prevail, we should ask ourselves, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” We should cry out, “Greater is He who is in us than he who is in the world.” We should remind ourselves that in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loves us. God is the sovereign Lord who has planned everything, who is in control of everything, who works everything for His own glory and for the good of those who love Him. He is the Divine Potter who from the same lump of clay has made vessels for honor and vessels for dishonor that He might through one display the glory of His mercy and that He might through the other display the glory of His power and righteous indignation. He is the Lord, the Lord of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel. We need not be anxious that His church might be destroyed nor fear that His kingdom might fail.

In our passage for today, this sovereign Lord acts as a Judge and proclaims a verdict upon sinful Judah. This is our second point, the verdict. The verdict consists of tragic contrasts of a noble past with a ignoble fall into wicked corruption. Jerusalem as a representative for the whole of God’s people was once a faithful city, but now she is a harlot, a loose woman who betrays her Husband and takes other lovers. God often compares His covenant with His people to a marriage covenant, and compares their worshipping other gods to the unfaithfulness of adultery. The once honorable bride has fallen into harlotry and broken covenant with her glorious Husband.

The reality is that we increasingly become like whatever we worship. When Jerusalem was faithful to the covenant and

exclusively worshipped the living and true God, the city was full of justice. Laws were legislated, administered and adjudicated in conformity with the revealed will of God. The concept of moral absolutes rooted in God's holiness and revealed in Scripture was honored. Justice was blind, no respecter of persons, and all that mattered was how the facts of a case weighed in the scales of justice. Righteousness, the right administration of law in conformity with God's will, is personified as one who once dwelt in Jerusalem. He was no occasional guest and not a traveler who was passing through but a permanent resident in that city.

That is the noble past. Now comes the ignoble fall. Righteousness once lodged in Jerusalem, but no longer. Now Jerusalem is the dwelling place of murderers, the worst class of humanity, those who engage in violent crime. If murder is now tolerated, then lesser crimes would be not only tolerated but even accepted and encouraged.

The prophet returns to metaphor. Jerusalem's silver has become dross, and her wine has become water. That which is precious has become so adulterated and diluted that it has lost all its value. Debased silver and diluted wine are here apt metaphors for the loss of civic virtue and the corruption and coarsening of society. One wonders if the prophet chose these metaphors because of actual incidents as Jerusalem descended into immorality. The government can steal by adding worthless metals to the silver used to mint money. Merchants can steal by adding common water to expensive wines. Perhaps this actually occurred and became increasingly common as Jerusalem

abandoned moral absolutes for the expedient and the convenient.

The prophet returns to a more literal description of Jerusalem's fall. The princes had become rebellious. Those in places of authority who should have set a moral example for society had themselves become rebels against God and His law. Those who should quell that immoral, rebellious spirit which destroys the very fabric of society had become rebels themselves. They had joined that seminal rebellion which began when pride first welled up in the heart of Lucifer, and they had themselves become seed of the serpent and a brood of vipers. As a result of their immoral rebellion, the princes had become companions with the common thief. They aided and abetted the thief and became his associate in crime by perverting justice. The princes administered the courts for personal gain, and justice was no longer blind. The princes no longer loved justice but bribes and no longer pursued peace but personal rewards. Their primary concern was no longer "What is right?" but "What is in it for me?" The orphan and the widow came to their courts with just causes, but they no longer received a just hearing because they had nothing to offer as a bride. The poor cannot compete with the thieves who can offer their stolen goods as bribes.

The divine Judge has proclaimed His righteous verdict, and then He will execute His judgment as an expression of both mercy and justice. God will bring His righteous judgment upon His covenant people as a whole, but it will be an instrument of mercy for the righteous remnant within the nation. For them, it will not be a cutting off but a cutting back, a pruning for their

own ultimate good. For the elect within the covenant people, God's judgment will not be an outpouring of wrath but a loving chastisement for their true benefit.

Hebrews 12:5-6,11

- 5 And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: "My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him;
- 6 For whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives."
  
- 11 Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

The covenant people as a whole have become God's adversaries and His enemies. God therefore turns His hand against His people and wars against them, but His purpose is not to destroy them, to annihilate them, to consume them. God's purpose is to purge them, to purify them, to restore them. God's judgment will refine His covenant people as silver and purge away their dross. He will restore righteous judges such as characterized the administrations of David and Solomon. Jerusalem will again be called the city of righteousness and the faithful city.

Let me comment on the fulfillment of this prophecy. There was a real but limited fulfillment through the judgment of the Babylonian exile. God used Babylon as His instrument of judgment against Judah. During their exile in Babylon, the

covenant people were immersed into an idolatrous culture, and God used this traumatic experience to cure them of their love for idols. God blessed His people in exile with a revival under Ezra and enabled a remnant to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild the city.

That fulfillment was a real fulfillment but only a preliminary fulfillment. This preliminary fulfillment was a mere shadow of the principle fulfillment which was realized later through the coming of Christ, that quintessential refiner of debased silver.

Malachi 3:1-4

- 1 "Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming," says the LORD of hosts.
- 2 "But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner's fire and like launderer's soap.
- 3 He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver; he will purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer to the LORD an offering in righteousness.
- 4 "Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasant to the LORD, as in the days of old, as in former years."

Jesus came to His people, and His own received Him not. There were, however, a righteous remnant in the nation, those who were Israelites indeed in whom there was no guile. These

recognized Jesus as the Messiah and received Him and followed Him. After Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension, Gentiles also believed in Jesus and were added to Jesus' people. These believers, Jew and Gentile together, became the church, the Israel of the new covenant, the Bride of Christ. This prophecy is fulfilled as the covenant people are sanctified and become progressively a holy people. This prophecy is further fulfilled as the church disciples nations and transforms cultures in conformity with holiness.

This prophecy will have its perfect fulfillment at the return of Christ. That is when Jesus will perfectly apply His redeeming work to His people and completely purge away their sin. He will then present His Bride to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but holy and without blemish. And the heavenly Jerusalem shall descend upon a glorified earth.

Revelation 21:23-27

- 23 The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb is its light.
- 24 And the nations of those who are saved shall walk in its light, and the kings of the earth bring their glory and honor into it.
- 25 Its gates shall not be shut at all by day (there shall be no night there).
- 26 And they shall bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it.
- 27 But there shall by no means enter it anything that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie, but only those who are written in the Lamb's Book of Life.

We have looked at the Judge, His verdict and His mercy. Our last point is the Judge's justice. We read in verse 27, "Zion shall be redeemed with justice and her penitents with righteousness." God will save His true people, His elect, in a way consistent with His justice and righteousness. As we read in Romans, God is able to be both just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. God is able to do this through the substitutionary atoning work of Jesus. Through His life of perfect obedience and through His death as a finished sacrifice, Jesus has established a righteous legal standing before God for all those who trust in Him. This is a righteousness that is God approved, God accepted and God given. Jesus enables God to be merciful to those who trust in Him without violating His divine justice. Thus, through the work of Christ, God is able to redeem Zion with justice and her penitents with righteousness.

Yet those who do not know Christ, those who have not looked to Jesus in faith, have no righteous legal Advocate with the Father, and God deals with them in terms of justice alone. There is no ultimate mercy apart from Christ, and the divine Judge justly cuts off and destroys the transgressors and sinners among the covenant people. God consumes those who forsake the Lord and who violate God's covenant. These are those who love the darkness of sinful living and so refuse to come the Light of Christ and His salvation.

The prophet says that the day of judgment will be for them a day of shame and embarrassment. They will be ashamed of the groves and gardens where they had once worshipped their idols.

Once they had gloried in their pagan sanctuaries in their natural settings. Now they will recognize their idols for the demonic delusions and audacious illusions which they were. They will then see that their religious activities were in reality flimsy excuses for their sinful rebellion, mere fig leaves to cover their moral nakedness. They will see that their religious activities were a brazen affront to the living and true God, a slap in the face of the Lord, the Lord of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel.

When these people rejected God as their authority, they also cut themselves off from God as their life and sustenance. They became like their pagan trees and gardens during a drought when they are cut off from water. Without water, the vegetation fades and eventually becomes a flammable tinder box which easily catches fire and readily burns.

The prophet then says that in the context of judgment, the strong shall be as tinder and their work as a spark. The strong are those who thought themselves capable of surviving, even prospering, in their own strength apart from God. Their work is the entire culture they have built upon this secular and godless foundation. These two, the strong and their work, will come together on judgment day as spark and tinder, and the result will be the everlasting burning of an eternal judgment. There were partial realizations of this judgment within history. There was the destruction of the earthly Jerusalem first by the Babylonians and later by the Romans. Yet the ultimate fulfillment of this judgment in justice will occur when Jesus returns to earth to judge the nations with the authority entrusted to Him by the Father.

Sometimes we today are discouraged. We see the organized churches which once stood for righteousness and truth but today have clergy which deny the faith and condone, even promote immorality. We see the schools of higher learning which were founded to train man to preach God's Word but which have become secular institutions which challenge God's truth at every turn. We think of our government which was founded upon the moral principles of God's law but which now protects certain immoral practices and restricts the honoring of God in public places. We focus upon these things, and we can lose hope.

We need to keep our focus on the sovereign Lord, the Lord of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel. We need to remember He is in sovereign control and that He will judge His adversaries. We need to remember that God's true people are not destined for His wrath. Any suffering they experience in these evil times will be a divine chastening designed for their spiritual good.

Lastly, as you consider those destined for divine wrath, never forget that that is what you also deserve. Give God thanks for His sovereign grace, His special grace, His grace to you. If God had not sent Christ to die for you, if God had not sent the Holy Spirit to work faith in your heart, you too would be overpowered by the sinful spirit of the age and you too would be ultimately swept away into never ending judgment. Be grateful for God's mercy. It is a mystery why God has been merciful to us. All we know is that we do not deserve God's mercy. All we know is that our salvation is all of grace to the glory and praise of God.