

The JUSTICE OF GOD and FEAR OF GOD AND FAITH IN CHRIST

Both by Cornelius R. Stam

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The Justice of God IN PUNISHMENT AND REWARD By Cornelius R. Stam A TALE OF TWO CITIES

Some years ago I drove through a charming little town at about 10:30 p.m. There were lovely homes with well-kept yards and gardens, attractive church buildings, and even the well-lit business district looked as if the shops and stores had just been painted and the streets cleaned. There were very few people about; they were all at home at that hour of the night. As I passed one home I saw several people singing around a piano.

Two hours later I passed through another town, about the same size, but how different! Two young men with their two young "girl friends" staggered down the main street, shouting obscenities and profanities into the night. A bit farther on there were two women outside a dingy, but noisy, bar, fighting, pulling at one another's hair and screaming at each other at the top of their lungs. A squad car drove past, but did not stop. It was one half hour past midnight as I reached the other end of this dingy town, with houses and places of business that looked as if nobody cared about anything.

I do not think I shall ever forget that night, nor the striking contrast between these two towns only a hundred miles apart.

As I drove on I began thinking about the responsibility of the mayor, the judges, the chief of police and the others who shared in the government of the latter city. True, the depraved creatures I had seen there were responsible for their own actions, but was not the responsibility of those in authority even greater?

If it is true, as we are told in Rom. 13:1, that "*the powers that be are ordained of God,*" were not that mayor and those judges and the chief of police accountable *to God* for the conditions that existed under their government? Was not their guilt greater than that of the miserable souls whose wickedness they permitted?

All this set me to thinking about *proportionate punishment* as it is taught in the Scriptures.

PROPORTIONATE PUNISHMENT

When I first came to know the grace of God there were some teachers of the Word who, I fear, entertained some unscriptural views about the future lot of the unsaved. It was not uncommon to hear them say, in essence: "Don't begrudge lost souls their drinking and dancing and gambling. These are the only pleasures they know; why deprive them of these paltry indulgences before they go into a lost eternity?"

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I suppose that this was an extension of the *Scriptural* fact that the lost cannot be saved by merely giving up worldly pleasures, but the extension was neither reasonable nor Scriptural.

It is true that unbelievers are not lost because of their sins but because they reject the Lord Jesus Christ. John 3:18 declares: “*He that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.*” Thus, as far as *salvation* is concerned, it is no longer “the sin question,” but “the Son question” that is pertinent.

But we are not dealing here with the question of salvation; we are dealing rather with the question of God’s judgment upon the lost. Should the sinner who at least fears God and *tries* to do what is right, bear the same penalty as the one who defies both God and His revealed will? And do not those whom God has set in high places in this life bear greater responsibility than those who are under them? Our rulers and lawmakers, our judges and police departments, had better think this through carefully and heed God’s Word on the subject.

It has always been God’s principle to punish in proportion to responsibility and guilt, entirely apart from dispensational considerations. Several passages of Scripture stand out in this connection. One is Luke 12:46-48, part of a parable which has to do with God’s covenant people, Israel, and the return of Christ to reign over them. Referring to the unbelieving and irresponsible “servant,” our Lord says:

“The lord of that servant will come in a day when he looketh not for him, and at an hour when he is not aware, and will cut him in sunder, and WILL APPOINT HIM HIS PORTION WITH THE UNBELIEVERS” (Ver. 46).

Mark well that the “servant” in this parable will have his portion “with the unbelievers,” but this does not imply that he will suffer an equal penalty with all *other* unbelievers, for the Lord goes on to say:

“And the servant which knew his lord’s will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with MANY STRIPES.

“But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with FEW STRIPES—FOR UNTO WHOMSOEVER MUCH IS GIVEN, OF HIM SHALL MUCH BE REQUIRED” (Vers. 47, 48).

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Rev. 20:12, 13 teaches this same principle. Here we unquestionably have the *final* judgment of the lost at the Great White Throne. Again, note carefully the wording:

“And I saw the dead, SMALL AND GREAT, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, ACCORDING TO THEIR WORKS.

“And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell [hades] delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man ACCORDING TO THEIR WORKS.”

All this confirmed by Paul, the apostle of grace for, remember, the Apostle Paul consistently proclaimed the good news of God’s grace against the background of deserved wrath. Thus in Rom. 2:5, 6, before dealing with justification by faith in Christ who paid the penalty for our sins, the apostle emphasizes *“the righteous judgment of God, who will render to every man ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS.”*

The unsaved do well to take this to heart, lest they “treasure up to themselves wrath against the day of wrath” (Rom. 2:5). They are lost because of their rejection of Christ, but having rejected Christ they must now answer for their own sins and pay their just penalty themselves. And *we* who know Christ do well to emphasize it, as Paul did in his proclamation of the grace of God, so that the lost may turn in faith to Christ and receive “redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins according to the riches of His grace” (Eph. 1:7).

PROPORTIONATE REWARD

As a boy I heard a well-meaning pastor discuss “the handwriting on the wall,” from Daniel 5. He emphasized particularly those familiar words from Verse 27:

“Thou are weighed in the balances and art found wanting.”

Failing to note that this “handwriting” was addressed to Belshazzar *as a ruler under God*, the pastor applied it to salvation—salvation by works. He warned that if our good works outweighed our bad works in the “day of judgment,” we would be received into heaven, but if the bad outweighed the good, God would say. *“Depart from Me, I never knew you.”*

To my young mind this immediately appeared as most unreasonable, for it meant that one who barely tipped the scales on the good side would be eternally saved, while one who had committed only a few more trivial sins would be eternally lost. It was not long before I learned that the pastor’s view was *both* unreasonable *and* unscriptural. The fact is, of course, that apart from Christ all are lost as sinners by nature and by practice. We say, apart from Christ, for our Lord’s payment for sin has changed the picture for us altogether.

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Just as unbelievers are lost, ultimately, not because of any demerit, but because of their rejection of Christ, so believers are saved, not by merit, but by grace, through faith in Christ, who died for our sins (Eph. 2:8, 9; Tit. 3:5; *et al*).

But to pursue the comparison further, as those who leave this life as *lost sinners* will finally be *judged* according to their works *as unbelievers*, so those who leave this life as *saved sinners* will be *rewarded* for their conduct and service *as believers*. Here we quote from a passage in our book, *Man, His Nature and Destiny*:

“It is significant, to be sure, that in connection with the judgment of the believer’s works the Spirit used a word which was also used in connection with the awarding of prizes. It is significant, too, that the word *bema* is never used in connection with God’s judgment of the unsaved. However, it is not the *word*, primarily, but the *context* which in each case establishes the character of the judgment referred to. The word *bema* is used twice in relation to the judgment of the believer’s works, though the subject is often dealt with in Paul’s epistles. In these passages the important thing is not so much when or where men are judged as *what* they are judged for.

“Will there then be a judgment in heaven, with all the remorse and shame that must necessarily accompany it? Evidently not *in heaven*. We believe this judgment will take place at our meeting with the Lord ‘in the air.’

“The word ‘meet’ in I Thes. 4:17 does not refer to a chance meeting, but to a *planned* meeting. Thus some translators have rendered this passage: ‘*We which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them...for a meeting with the Lord in the air.*’

“Just where ‘in the air’ this meeting will be held we do not know, nor how long it will last. Perhaps it will have some relation to the awful judgments taking place on earth during the tribulation period. But that the judgment of the members of Christ’s Body will be held at this time seems further to be established by Paul’s words in II Tim. 4:7, 8:

“I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith:

“Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give me AT THAT DAY; and not to me only, but unto all them also that love His appearing.”¹

We believe that there will be comparable judgments and rewards for the believers of other dispensations (See Dan. 12:3; Mal. 3:16, 17), but as to *our* appearance before Christ at His *bema*,² to receive rewards or “suffer loss,” the Scriptures are clear and positive:

Rom. 14:10: “... for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.”

¹ *Man, His Nature and Destiny*, Pp. 108, 109.

² Rendered “judgment seat” in the KJV.

I Cor. 3:13-17: “Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is.

“If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon,³ he shall receive a reward.

“If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire.

“Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?

“If any man defile⁴ the temple of God, him shall God destroy;⁴ for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are.”

II Cor. 5:10: “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad.”

From these passages it is clear that those *already saved by grace* will one day stand before the Lord Jesus Christ, at which time their conduct as believers will be reviewed and the quality of their “workmanship” (as builders of His “temple”) will be examined. At that time it will be a bitter and shameful experience for believers who have been irresponsible and careless to “suffer loss,” while others who have served the Lord faithfully, sacrificially, and intelligently will be richly rewarded.⁵

PUNISHMENT AND REWARD

Finally, if we say that the unsaved should take to heart the fact that God will one day judge them “according to their works,” opening the “books,” the records of their conduct, and bringing them to account for every sin they have ever committed, should not we, who by grace have been saved from the penalty of sin, consider serious the fact that *we* shall one day—who knows how soon!—stand before the Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, to receive rewards for our conduct and service as Christians, or else to suffer loss?

Shall we decry the indifference of Christ-rejecters if we, who have by grace been brought face to face with life's most important issues, are ourselves indifferent to the condition of the lost about us and careless about our conduct and service as believers in Christ?

May God, in His grace, help us to live each day with “that day” in view.

³ Upon the foundation laid by the apostle Paul, See Verse 10.

⁴ “defile” and “destroy” are the same word in the Greek, meaning “to mar.”

⁵ Here see also Rom. 8:17, 18; I Cor. 9:25-27; II Cor. 4:17; Col. 3:23-25; 4:1; II Tim. 2:12 and Editor's book, *Man, His Nature and Destiny*, Pp. 110-119.

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We trust that the foregoing study in the Word may have proved a blessing to you.

The following is, perhaps, even more important, having to do with a subject that has confused many religious people.

Please read it carefully, and with sincere prayer that God will “open the eyes of your understanding.”

**Fear of God
and
Faith in Christ**
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Few people realize how very much the Bible has to say about the fear of God, and fewer still understand the meaning of the term. It is important that we do understand it, however, for in the list of sins for which the wicked stand condemned we find the words: “*There is no fear of God before their eyes*” (Rom. 3:18).

WHAT IS THE FEAR OF GOD?

Many of us have been taught from childhood that the fear of God is “reverential trust,” but this writer long felt that this definition is most inadequate.

The Hebrew word *yirah*, most often used for “fear” in the term “fear of God,” does indeed often involve the idea of reverence, *if* we recognize that true reverence is a deep and profound regard, mingled with awe and fear. But as to the fear of God being “reverential *trust*,” this waters down the meaning altogether too much, as is evident from the following passages in which the word *yirah* occurs:

Duet. 2:25: “This day will I begin to put the dread of thee and the fear of thee upon the nations that are under the whole heaven, who shall hear report of thee, and shall tremble....”

Psa. 2:11: “Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling.”

The Hebrew *pachad*, also used in the term “fear of God,” or “fear of the Lord,” is an even stronger word, meaning *dread*, or *terror*, and is frequently used quite apart from any thought of reverence, as in the following examples:

Job 21:9: “Their houses are safe from fear....”

Psa. 64:1: “...preserve my life from fear of the enemy.”

Prov. 1:26: “I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh.”

But there can be no misunderstanding as to the common Greek word used in our Bibles for *fear*. This is the word *phobos*, from which our English word *phobia* is derived, and it is consistently rendered fear, terror, to be afraid, etc., in our King James Version.

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When the angel appeared to the shepherds at Christ's birth, "*they were sore afraid*" (Luke 2:9). When the Lord was seen walking on the sea at night, the disciples "*cried out for fear,*" until the Lord called: "*It is I, be not afraid*" (Matt. 14:26, 27). When the angel appeared and rolled away the stone from our Lord's sepulcher, we read that "*for fear of him the keepers did shake*" (Matt. 28:4). Paul ministered among the Corinthians we are told, "*in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling*" (I Cor. 2:3). Later he warned them of "*the terror of the Lord*" (II Cor. 5:11). And in his letter to the Hebrews we read of those who "*through fear of death*" are all their lifetime subject to bondage (Heb. 2:15). In all these passages the word *phobos* is used, and they leave little room for doubt as to the meaning of this word in the phrase "fear of God."

We do not mean to imply that the fear of God may not *produce* a reverential trust, but actually it is in itself exactly what the term "*fear of God*" implies. It is the natural result of an appreciation of our own nothingness and of the infinite greatness and majesty of God. It stands opposed to pride and self-confidence. It is accompanied by the wholesome fear to disobey or displease Him. Thus it was that when one dying malefactor at Calvary ridiculed Christ, the other rebuked him, saying:

"Doest not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?"

"And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss" (Luke 23:40, 41).

THE FEAR OF GOD AND NATIONAL BLESSING

With all that has been said, however, it must be remembered that fear and faith do not necessarily go together. When some leading figure in politics, business or entertainment says something complimentary about God or the Bible, or asks for prayer, many Christians immediately conclude that he must know Christ as his Savior. Actually, it may be, merely, that he fears God. This in itself is an advantage, but it must not be confused with personal salvation by faith in Christ.

To the nation Israel, God said: "*Thou shalt fear the Lord thy God...*" (Deut. 6:13). King David declared in his last words: "*He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God*" (II Sam. 23:3). Solomon, in his proverbs said: "*...by the fear of the Lord men depart from evil*" (Prov. 16:6). In the Psalms we read: "*Surely His salvation is nigh them that fear Him; that glory may dwell in our land*" (Psa. 85:9).

Generally speaking, the term "fear of God" in the Old Testament Scriptures is associated with God's covenant people, Israel, and the faithful among these were often called those who feared God, but this is not always the case. In II Kings 17:41, for example, we read about the Gentiles with whom the king of Assyria re-peopled Samaria: "*So these nations feared the Lord, and served their graven images....*" These pagans had come to fear Israel's God, but had not given up their idolatry. This had brought them a step nearer to *knowing* God, but it does not mean that they were regenerate believers.

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With these facts in mind let us consider why it is that God appears to be withdrawing His blessing from our beloved nation.

AMERICA AND THE FEAR OF GOD

It appears evident that *some* of our founding fathers were truly saved men who knew the Lord Jesus Christ in a personal way. But even apart from this, these men were, on the whole, God fearing men. They knew the Bible and revered its Author, often kneeling together in prayer for divine guidance.

This was a great advantage to the nation and to all of us who have since enjoyed the prosperity and freedom of the Republic which, under God, they formed. But a dark cloud has gathered on the horizon and is now overshadowing almost every aspect of American life.

What is it that is casting this dark shadow upon us? Is it that our form of government has proven itself inadequate for the 20th century? Is it that the influence of communism is irresistible? Is it simply misfortune? No, it is because America, its rulers and its people, have so largely lost a sense of the fear of God.

If you ask why the general rebellion against authority, why the races battle each other in the streets, why the widening generation gap, why all seem to be *demanding* their “rights,” the answer is that the fear of God has largely disappeared and is considered by many to be *passee*. The Bible is no longer revered as God’s Word, and the general ignorance of its contents is appalling.

If you ask why the corruption and dishonesty in government, business and society, why the fearful rise in crime, why the “new morality” with its perversion of everything sacred, why so many people, especially young people, are so completely *lost*, one answer covers it all: the fear of God is so largely missing, and increasing millions of Americans no longer have an authoritative Voice to guide and direct them. We must remember that when even unregenerate people try to live by the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount, even though these are not God’s particular message for us today, this still makes for a more peaceful society. This does not save them, but it indicates the wholesome fear of God.

If you ask why so many of our rulers and intellectual leaders keep coming up with the *wrong* answers to our problems, why so many of their plans seem to work out wrong, the answer is plain: too many of them have forgotten that “*the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom*” (Prov. 9:10). This is why they are failing in their attempts to diagnose and solve the social and moral problems that are engulfing us.

“*God is not mocked.*” He does not take lightly this departure from His Word and will by a nation so greatly blessed. Not only does His Word declare that “*the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God*” (I Cor. 3:19); it also declares that He *frustrates* ungodly men and *thwarts* their attempts to run their affairs without Him.

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I Cor. 1:19, 20: “For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.

“Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?”

How we see the truth of this passage enacted all about us today!

THE FEAR OF GOD AND THE BELIEVER

There are those who feel that the fear of God is inconsistent with grace and that believers today, members of the Body of Christ, should not experience this fear. They quote I John 4:18 to prove that perfect love will banish the fear of God, but this passage says nothing of the kind. Read it and you will see that it actually says that an appreciation of God’s love will cast out the fear of *man* and of *persecution*. The very fact that Paul, the apostle of grace, has more to say about the fear of God than any other New Testament writer should make it evident that the fear of God is *not* inconsistent with grace.

To think that a holy God who, offended by sin, will judge without respect of persons, pouring out his wrath and casting into hell, has *saved me*—paying for *my* sins at the sacrifice of *His own beloved Son!* To think what I have escaped and how! To think that I may address the One who will judge sinners in His wrath, as *Father!* What emotions this should awaken in my heart—mingled emotions of gratitude and love and joy on the one hand and of fear and trembling on the other, as one who has been rescued from fearful destruction by God Himself at infinite cost.

Believers whose attitude toward God goes no deeper than reverential trust, understand little of the cross—and little of God’s grace.

The fear to which the Scriptures—yes, and the Pauline Scriptures—exhorts us, is not the fear of an ill-treated slave or of a guilty criminal; it is just what the term indicates: “fear of *God*”—*God*, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe; *God*, the Judge of all; *God*, infinite in power, love, wisdom, righteousness and holiness. If men of past ages have trembled in the presence of angels, how much more should we fear God, even though He, in His grace, has taken us to His heart!

If the president of the United States should invite you to dine with him at the White House, you would undoubtedly prepare for the visit with fear and trembling! And this is a democracy! Your fear would not spring from any concern over what the President might *do* to you. It would spring rather from an appropriate realization of the importance of the presidency, if not of the president himself. Nor would it be fitting if, thus invited, you were to become too familiar with the president and treat him as a pal. The fact that the president had invited you to dinner would be no excuse for forgetting the dignity of his office.

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In this dispensation of grace God has, indeed, given believers an exalted position at His own right hand, there to be blessed with “all spiritual blessings” in Christ. But it does not follow from this that we should forget our own unworthiness or forget *who* it is that has bestowed these undeserved blessings upon us. Our relationship to God will prove all the more sacred when these facts are borne in mind, but once let us forget them and we will have nothing more than theological dogma left, with all the sacredness and blessedness gone. Forget them and grace itself will have lost its significance.

Thus it is that Paul, God’s appointed apostle of grace, exhorts us in Rom. 11:20: “*Be not highminded, but fear.*” Thus he bids us, in Phil. 2:12: “*Work out [not “for”] your own salvation with fear and trembling,*” and beseechs us, in Eph. 5:21: “*Submit yourselves one to another in the fear of God.*” Thus he exhorts servants, in Col. 3:22, to serve their masters “*in singleness of heart, fearing God.*” Thus he exhorts us all, in II Cor. 7:1, to cleanse ourselves, “*perfecting holiness in the fear of God.*” And thus, in looking forward to the *bema*, the “judgment seat of Christ,” where believers will receive rewards or suffer loss, the apostle says in II Cor. 5:11: “*Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men.*” In that day, while the least faithful believer will still be saved by the grace of God (I Cor. 3:14, 15), it will be a shameful and bitter experience to have to “suffer loss” of rewards; to have to stand disgraced and empty-handed before the One who gave His life’s blood to save us; to be told that we have done no *real* service for Christ or our fellowmen.⁶

The fear of God is incompatible with grace? How can this be when Paul, the Apostle of grace, has so much to say about it? A deeper appreciation of God’s grace, a deeper gratitude and joy, a more sacred love and adoration are the fruits of this godly fear in the believer.

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But while the fear of God produces such salutary effects in the life of the believer, it must not be supposed that the fear of God saves the unbeliever. It only makes him better to live with and *may* make him more open to receive Christ as his Lord and Savior. It is not how we *feel* toward God, but what we *do* about His revealed will that saves us.

God has clearly stated in His Word that “*the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life, through Jesus Christ our Lord*” (Rom. 6:23). It is through Christ’s death for our sins at Calvary that God can now justly offer eternal life to us as a free gift. It is because Christ took upon Himself all the shame and blame and punishment for our sins that God can now bestow upon sinners complete justification and redemption as a gift of grace:

“Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:24).

“In whom we have redemption, through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace” (Eph. 1:7).

⁶ See the writer’s booklet: *Will There Be Tears in Heaven?*

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“That in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us through Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:7).

Should these lines be read by some who are not certain of eternal life, who still do not know the Lord Jesus Christ in a personal way, we urge you to trust Christ as your Lord and Savior now, accepting by faith *“the gift of God,”* which is *“eternal life, through Jesus Christ our Lord.”*

“For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the Just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God.”

—Pet. 3:18
