



The

JUSTICE &
GOODNESS
of GOD

+ *A Biblical Case for the Final Judgment* +

THOMAS R. SCHREINER

“This book on the final judgment of God reflects everything we have come to expect from the scholarship of Tom Schreiner—judicious exegesis, confessional fidelity, practical application, and clear writing. The topic is not an easy one to write on, but it is a necessary one lest we forget why the gospel of Jesus is indeed good news.”

Jonny Gibson, Associate Professor of Old Testament, Westminster Theological Seminary; coeditor, *Ruined Sinners to Reclaim*

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Thomas R. Schreiner

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Preface

WHY WOULD ANYONE want to write on the final judgment? It might seem that anyone who writes on this theme is obsessed with the negative, with hate instead of love, with punishment instead of mercy, with crankiness instead of joy. It is probably true that some who focus on judgment live in winter instead of summer and have acerbic personalities, and maybe some readers will suspect that I am of the same temperament. In any case, let me explain why I wanted to write a book on the final judgment.

First, Scripture often talks about judgment; it is a pervasive theme in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, though I limit myself mainly to the New Testament since the topic is far too large to include the whole Bible in a brief book. Judgment isn't the invention of unhappy people but represents the truth. Adolf Schlatter rightly says, "When truth becomes our judge and shows us what is reprehensible, we fall silent before our just Judge."¹

Second, judgment is often ignored or overlooked in scholarship in that there are not many books on the theme. Still, some helpful treatments are available,² but my intention is to write a brief and accessible

1 Adolf Schlatter, *Do We Know Jesus? Daily Insights for the Mind and Soul*, trans. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Robert W. Yarbrough (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2005), 51.

2 R. V. G. Tasker, *The Biblical Doctrine of the Wrath of God* (London: Tyndale Press, 1951); Leon Morris, *The Biblical Doctrine of Judgment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960); John R. Coulson, *The Righteous Judgment of God: Aspects of Judgment in Paul's Letters* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016); Brendan Byrne, *Paul and the Economy of Salvation*:

introduction to the theme and to restrict the study mainly (though not exclusively) to the final judgment. Certainly the scriptural story can't be understood apart from the last judgment. Salvation, justification, reconciliation, redemption, regeneration, adoption, and other salvific realities don't make any sense if human beings don't deserve condemnation. If there is nothing to be saved from, we don't need to be justified, reconciled, redeemed, and forgiven.

Third, I believe one of the reasons the Christian gospel seems alien to many today is that they reject the notion of a last judgment. As Leon Morris says, the modern person "has largely dismissed the thought of final judgment from his mind. He does not think of himself as accountable. The New Testament does not share his unreasoning optimism."³ The final destruction of sinners, of those who rebel against the Lord, of those who don't put their faith and trust in him, seems unjust and vindictive to many today. Morris again is to the point: "It seems axiomatic to us that God in love will deliver all men. This is not what Scripture teaches."⁴ People aren't inclined to turn to Jesus Christ for forgiveness and to escape wrath since they don't think their sins warrant punishment. I am under no illusion that non-Christians will read this book, or that unbelievers, even if they did read it, would be persuaded. I am writing this book for missionaries, for pastors, for Christians in ministry, and for all Christians to remind us that judgment is fundamental to the message we proclaim so that we will not be ashamed of or neglect speaking about judgment. Indeed, I hope Christians will rejoice in judgment, not because they long for the punishment of others (since we pray and hope that all will be saved) but because judgment displays the holiness and goodness of God. Without judgment, God would not be good, and life on earth would be without meaning since our moral decisions would not ultimately matter. They might matter to us personally, but there would be no final reckoning for our lives,

Reading from the Perspective of the Last Judgment (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021).

3 Morris, *The Biblical Doctrine of Judgment*, 65–66.

4 Morris, *The Biblical Doctrine of Judgment*, 69.

no ultimate accountability for our actions, and thus no significance to our lives—and that would be bad news indeed.

I am grateful to Crossway for publishing this book and in particular for Justin Taylor who carefully read an earlier draft and made many helpful suggestions. I have noted some of what he suggested in footnotes. Finally, my friend and outstanding editor Chris Cowan proved to be an amazing help with his keen reading and many helpful suggestions.

Abbreviations

ACCS	Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture
BBR	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
BDAG	Danker, Frederick W., Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BSac	<i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i>
CSC	Christian Standard Commentary
2 En.	2 Enoch
2 Esd.	2 Esdras
ET	English translation
ITC	International Theological Commentary
LCC	Library of Christian Classics
4 Macc.	4 Maccabees
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIDNTTE	<i>New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis</i> . 4 vols. Revision editor, Moisés Silva. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014.
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
Sib. Or.	Sibylline Oracles

SSST	Short Studies in Systematic Theology
<i>Them</i>	<i>Themelios</i>
T. Isaac	Testament of Isaac
<i>TLOT</i>	<i>Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . 3 vols. Edited by Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann. Translated by Mark E. Biddle. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997.
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament

Only a Holy God

*Righteous are you, O LORD,
and right are your rules.*

PSALM 119:137

Introduction

Leon Morris brilliantly begins his book on judgment with several texts showing that judgment and justice belong together: if there is no judgment, then there is no justice.¹ Isaiah proclaims that “the LORD is a God of justice” (Isa. 30:18). Malachi casts aspersions on those who doubt whether God is “the God of justice” (Mal. 2:17) since no one will trust or obey the Lord if he is unjust. Isaiah reminds us that the Lord doesn’t need human beings to inform him about what is just:

Who taught him the path of justice,
and taught him knowledge,
and showed him the way of understanding? (Isa. 40:14)

Abraham prays to the Lord about the fate of Sodom, asking with confidence, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” (Gen.

¹ Leon Morris, *The Biblical Doctrine of Judgment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960), 7–8.

18:25). The Scriptures assure us that God is fair and just since “I the LORD love justice” (Isa. 61:8).

The Lord loves justice because his very person, his very nature, is just. He doesn’t love justice as something outside of himself. Thus Moses sings,

The Rock, his work is perfect,
for all his ways are justice. (Deut. 32:4)

The psalmist declares, “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne” (Ps. 97:2). The Lord’s judgments are right because he loves justice, because *he is justice*.² He doesn’t need anyone to teach him justice since it is his very nature or character—justice defines him.³ Or, better, the Lord defines justice. Since God is just, he always does what is right, and his judgments should not be questioned but praised. Because if there were no justice in the world, the world would not make sense. It would be a place of absolute chaos and anarchy.⁴

We see God’s justice from the first story in the Bible. Adam and Eve were commanded not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17; 3:2–3), and they were threatened with death if they violated God’s instructions (Gen. 2:17; 3:3). We are not given any reason why eating from the particular tree is forbidden. We can say that God as the Creator and Lord defines good and evil, determining what is right and wrong. This is not to say that good and evil are arbitrary, since moral norms reflect God’s character and nature, but as the sovereign Lord of all, God may also give commands that aren’t in and of

2 This fits with the notion of divine simplicity so that we don’t conceive of God as made up of parts.

3 Morris says about the Lord, “He is essentially just, just in his inner being. Justice is not a matter of indifference, but one of passionate concern.” Morris, *The Biblical Doctrine of Judgment*, 19.

4 As Jonathan Leeman says, “Apart from God’s judgment, this universe makes no sense. Everything is worthless. Nothing is precious or valuable or worthwhile. Just ask the nihilist.” Jonathan Leeman, *The Rule of Love: How the Local Church Should Reflect God’s Love and Authority* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 122.

themselves moral norms. Adam and Eve transgressed God's command, rejecting his lordship over their lives, and consequently they were separated from God (Gen. 3:7–19), expelled from paradise (Gen. 3:23–24), and destined to die physically. Judgment for evil manifests itself in the earliest pages of the biblical story, showing that evil has consequences.

The flood story represents another shocking account of judgment, and once again it occurs at the outset of history, or at least the history that is recorded and written down. Human beings were indicted for being corrupt (Gen. 6:3, 11). Wickedness multiplied on earth like weeds spring up in a green lawn, and “every intention of the thoughts of [man's] heart was only evil continually” (Gen. 6:5). Two features of the account are rather striking.

First, the descriptions of human wickedness are vague. We are told that human beings were corrupt and wicked, that their thoughts were always evil. But a specific portrait or description of the evil they engaged in is lacking. We might expect a lurid account of what human beings were doing, given the horrific deluge that destroyed virtually the entire human race. Instead of their evil being detailed, we are invited to use our imaginations to sketch in the evils perpetrated by human beings.

Second, all except eight people in the world were swept away in the cataclysm that snuffed out their lives. If we ask ourselves why such a drastic measure was needed, the answer is that human beings were corrupt and wicked, that they practiced what was evil. In fact, we are told that every thought and motive was evil (Gen. 6:5). The judgment was drastic and overwhelming because the evil being perpetrated was comprehensive, devastating, and horrific.

The reason for such a judgment isn't obvious to many people in our own world, and thus I will attempt to chase down in this chapter the reasons for judgment in the Old Testament witness. There is no attempt to be complete here; instead I will take soundings of some Old Testament texts.⁵ In addition, I am treating the Old Testament as a canonical

5 For the last judgment in Second Temple Jewish literature, see Brendan Byrne, *Paul and the Economy of Salvation: Reading from the Perspective of the Last Judgment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 16–34.

unity, and thus the answer we are seeking must be discerned by reading the Old Testament witness as a whole. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that the judgment of the flood is a preview of the final judgment. In the New Testament, the flood has a typological relationship to the final judgment, pointing to and anticipating it. The judgment that will come at Jesus's return is compared to the judgment that devastated the world in the flood (Matt. 24:38–39; Luke 17:26–27; 2 Pet. 2:5, 9; 3:6). Thus, Old Testament accounts of judgment have an organic relationship to the final judgment, and they point to that judgment.

God Is Holy

One answer—a fundamental and important answer—as to why God judges evil is that he is holy. Often in the Old Testament, especially in Isaiah, Yahweh is called “the Holy One of Israel” (Ps. 78:41; Isa. 1:4; 5:19, 24; 10:20; 12:6; 17:7; 29:19; 30:11, 12, 15; 31:1; 37:23; 41:14, 16, 20; 43:3, 14; 45:11; 47:4; 48:17; 49:7; 54:5; 55:5; 60:9, 14; Jer. 50:29; 51:5). We often read about Yahweh’s “holy name” (e.g., 1 Chron. 16:10, 35; Pss. 30:4; 33:21; 111:9; Ezek. 36:20, 21, 22; 39:7, 25; 43:7, 8; Amos 2:7), which means that holiness is the Lord’s very nature and being.

Holiness is often defined as being separated from evil, though others have said that it signifies what is consecrated and devoted.⁶ These two definitions may not be as far apart as we might think since what is consecrated and devoted is also separated from common use. For instance, the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place are devoted to the sacrificial cult, but we could say that both places are separated from common use as well. So, too, the Sabbath is a consecrated day, a holy day (Ex. 20:8), but it is also separated from other days and, thus, special. We could say the same thing about holy garments (Ex. 28:2), holy offerings (Ex. 28:38), holy anointing oil (Ex. 30:25), and so on. They are separated from ordinary life and consecrated for special use.

We also receive further help by investigating other words associated with holiness. For instance, priests are to distinguish “between the

6 Peter J. Gentry, “The Meaning of ‘Holy’ in the Old Testament,” *BSac* 170 (2013): 400–417.

holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean” (Lev. 10:10; cf. Ezek. 22:26; 44:23). The holy is in the same category as that which is clean, while the unholy is unclean and defiled. Those from Aaron’s house can’t eat holy offerings until they are clean (Lev. 22:4). These texts refer to ritual defilement, which is not necessarily equated with sinfulness. Still, it seems that the reason uncleanness exists is because of the presence of sin in the world. Uncleanness, then, doesn’t necessarily point to personal sin, but it signifies a sickness in a world that is deformed and bent due to human evil. God stands apart from the world because of his holiness. “There is none holy like the LORD” (1 Sam. 2:2). Since the Lord is the “Holy One,” no one can be compared to him or is equal to him (Isa. 40:25).

The Lord is uniquely holy, and there is clearly a moral dimension to holiness. When the ark was returned from the Philistines to Israel in Beth-shemesh, some looked inside the ark and seventy people were struck dead (1 Sam. 6:19). They immediately responded, “Who is able to stand before the LORD, this holy God?” (1 Sam. 6:20). The author is clearly telling us that the sin of Israel is such that they were unable to live in God’s presence, since he is the Holy One—that is, he is beautiful and full of goodness in contrast to the sinfulness of human beings.

Nor is this an isolated thought. The psalmist asks,

O LORD, who shall sojourn in your tent?

Who shall dwell on your holy hill? (Ps. 15:1)

The answer reveals that holiness has to do with the Lord’s moral perfection and his blazing goodness, since those who can live on his holy mountain are those who live righteously, who refrain from slander, who do not injure their neighbors, who esteem the godly, who are true to their word, and who don’t take interest and deprive the poor of their income (Ps. 15:2–5). A similar question is asked in Psalm 24:

Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?

And who shall stand in his holy place? (Ps. 24:3)

The answer again has to do with goodness, since access to God is restricted to those who have “clean hands” and “a pure heart” and are characterized by honesty (Ps. 24:4). It seems apparent in this context that God’s holiness refers to his moral perfection and that righteousness is required of human beings as well.

Another fascinating window into God’s holiness is Psalm 99, where Yahweh reigns as one “enthroned upon the cherubim” (Ps. 99:1). Given the greatness of the Lord, people are to “praise your great and awesome name,” and the psalmist exclaims, “Holy is he!” (Ps. 99:3). God’s holiness here is related to his transcendence, to his sovereignty, to his reign as King over all. Yahweh’s holiness is a central theme of the psalm. Readers are exhorted,

Exalt the LORD our God;
 worship at his footstool!
 Holy is he! (Ps. 99:5; cf. 99:9)

Still, God’s holiness isn’t restricted to his transcendence but is also reflected in the “decrees” and “statutes” given to Israel (Ps. 99:7 CSB). The moral dimension of his holiness is confirmed in 99:8 since God is identified as one who forgives and also as “an avenger of their wrongdoings.” God’s holiness is such that sin either must be forgiven or avenged; it can’t be left alone because sin defaces, deforms, and destroys. God’s dazzling beauty and loveliness can’t allow sin to coexist with him; doing such would compromise his holiness, his very being.

Isaiah 6 is rightly famous, and it casts more light on our theme. Yahweh sits transcendentally and magnificently as the King in his temple. The seraphim stand around the Lord with their six wings. They cover their faces with two wings since the Lord is ever and always the Holy One, and thus they can’t look on his face. With two wings they cover their feet, which is another indication of their inferiority in the presence of the Creator and sovereign of all things. With two wings they fly as they serve at Yahweh’s behest, carrying out his decrees in the world. The seraphim praise the Lord as the thrice Holy One, signifying his

infinite and maximal holiness, as the one whose glory fills the entire world. Yahweh's holiness has a transcendent character because he is the King of the universe and even angels who are not defiled with sin cannot gaze at him.

The temple fills with "smoke," and the Hebrew word used in Isaiah 6:4 occurs in the text about the "smoking fire pot" that passed between the pieces in the Lord's covenant with Abram (Gen. 15:17). Mount Sinai also smoked like a furnace when the Lord descended on it (Ex. 19:18). In 2 Samuel 22:9, smoke is aligned with God's consuming fire (cf. Ps. 18:8). The temple filling with smoke communicates God's presence, and the parallels and context suggest that his presence is terrifying. It is frightening because of Yahweh's holiness, his moral perfection.

Isaiah's response supports such a reading. Isaiah pronounces a woe on himself since he is "a man of unclean lips" inasmuch as he has seen "the King, the LORD of hosts" (Isa. 6:5). We see further evidence that moral perfection characterizes Yahweh's holiness when Isaiah became painfully aware of his uncleanness, an uncleanness that needed to be atoned for before he could serve as the Lord's messenger (Isa. 6:6-7). When human beings see God as he is, reigning and ruling transcendentally as King and Lord, then they realize that they can't stand in his presence since he is beautiful in holiness.

It would be misleading to link holiness only with God's judgment. Hosea 11 predicts Israel's exile to Assyria after the nation violated the Lord's covenant stipulations. Still, the judgment will not be comprehensive and complete so that the nation is entirely obliterated. The Lord will not wipe them out as he destroyed Admah and Zeboiim, on which fire rained down when Sodom and Gomorrah were annihilated (Hos. 11:8). Because the Lord is not a human being, because he is "the Holy One," he will spare his people (Hos. 11:9). God is holy in that he is true to his name; he will not violate or renege on his covenant promises to Israel. We see that God is also holy in his mercy and his love.

Yahweh is the "One who is high and lifted up," who lives "in the high and holy place" (Isa. 57:15). Surprisingly, however, the transcendent

one is also immanent. He dwells with his people, with the one “who is of a contrite and lowly spirit,” promising

to revive the spirit of the lowly,
and to revive the heart of the contrite. (Isa. 57:15)

God’s holiness doesn’t mean that he isn’t merciful (we just saw his mercy in Hos. 11), but we do need to think about what it means for God to show mercy.

We saw earlier in Isaiah 6 that God’s holiness doesn’t preclude fellowship with human beings since there is forgiveness and atonement. God’s holiness should not be interpreted to mean that he doesn’t show mercy. God as the Holy One has fellowship with a lowly and oppressed people. God’s holiness and forgiveness need to be read in light of the larger storyline of Isaiah, since in Isaiah 53 the servant of the Lord bears and suffers for the sins of his people. He has “borne our griefs” and was “stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted” (Isa. 53:4). Isaiah emphasizes that the servant took the punishment we deserved:

He was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace. (Isa. 53:5)

God has mercy on those who have gone astray, but not without satisfying his justice:

the LORD has laid on him [the servant]
the iniquity of us all. (Isa. 53:6).

Even though he was without sin (Isa. 53:7, 9), the servant “was numbered with the transgressors” and “bore the sin of many” (Isa. 53:12). Human beings have fellowship with the Holy One of Israel because of the Lord’s forgiving mercy, because the servant took upon himself the punishment sinners deserved, satisfying the justice God

demanded. In the death of the servant, both the justice and love of God are displayed.

God Is Righteous

The righteousness of God is a major theme in the Old Testament.⁷ Even though it is not the focus of this book, it is important to note that God's righteousness in the Old Testament is often a saving righteousness instead of a judging righteousness. (Paul picks up this theme of God's saving righteousness in Rom. 1:17 when he declares that God's saving righteousness is revealed in the gospel.) Remarkably, some scholars deny that God's righteousness is ever a judging righteousness in the Old Testament.⁸ As we shall see, this assessment is clearly mistaken, even if the number of verses that forge this connection is limited.

Before linking together God's righteousness and judgment, it is imperative to remind ourselves that the Lord *is* righteous, which means that he always does what is right and virtuous. The notion is expressed well in Deuteronomy 32:4:

The Rock, his work is perfect,
for all his ways are justice.

A God of faithfulness and without iniquity,
just and upright is he.

The affirmations supporting God's righteousness are striking and pervasive in that his justice, faithfulness, impartiality, righteousness, and reliability are asserted. Before we even consider the judgments of God, we see the ground, the basis, and the foundation for his judgments. He doesn't judge because he is wicked, delights in evil, or is somehow

7 For a brief discussion of the meaning of righteousness in Paul, with attention to the Old Testament background, see Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, 2nd ed., BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 66–78.

8 See the discussion in Brendan Byrne, *Romans*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 57–58, 65–66. Byrne, incidentally, agrees that God's righteousness can't be separated from judgment.

perversely sadistic. He judges because he is perfect in righteousness so that he is unstained and uncontaminated by evil.

David affirms, in a context where the wicked are trying to destroy him, that

the LORD is righteous;
he loves righteous deeds. (Ps. 11:7)

The order of the clauses here is important. First, we are told that the Lord *is righteous*; that is his character and nature, that is who he is ontologically. First comes being, then doing. Since the Lord is inherently and intrinsically righteous, he loves righteous actions. We fear authorities over us if they are twisted by evil or if they reward those who are corrupt, unethical, and immoral. But we respect and honor an authority who is righteous and who takes pleasure in what is good. The self-revelation of the Lord indicates that he is infinitely perfect—a God who is pure and unsullied goodness, who takes delight when human beings live righteously. It makes perfect sense, then, that God rewards those who practice goodness. The logic is again simple and clear: “The LORD is righteous; he loves righteous deeds” (Ps. 11:7; cf. Ps. 9:4).

If the Lord is righteous, loves righteousness, and rewards righteousness, then the converse follows as well. His love of righteousness also means that evil will be frowned on and punished. We see this several times in the Old Testament. When the southern kingdom of Judah under Rehoboam is disciplined for departing from the Lord, they confess that their punishment is deserved, declaring, “The LORD is righteous” (2 Chron. 12:6). Ezra confesses the sins of Israel in Ezra 9:1–15. He acknowledges that all the sorrow and pain Israel experienced was deserved, that God was righteous on account of the guilt of the nation (Ezra 9:15), while at the same time remembering the Lord’s mercy to his people. Nehemiah, writing at the same time as Ezra (in the 400s, after Israel had been exiled and had then returned to the land), gives us a tour of Israel’s history. He emphasizes the covenant unfaithfulness of the nation, their constant swerving from the Lord’s ways. Thus he

declares about the Lord, “Yet you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly” (Neh. 9:33). The judgments Israel experienced substantiate Yahweh’s rectitude.

We find the same sentiment earlier in Israel’s history. Daniel prays that the promise of Jeremiah (Jer. 25:11–12; 29:10), which pledges that the nation would return to the land after seventy years, would be fulfilled. Like Ezra and Nehemiah, Daniel confesses the sins of Israel. When he comes to the exile he says, “The LORD has kept ready the calamity and has brought it upon us, for the LORD our God is righteous in all the works that he has done, and we have not obeyed his voice” (Dan. 9:14). The logic is exactly the same that we saw above. Since God is righteous, he loves and rewards good deeds. But it stands to reason as well that since God is righteous, he punishes evil.

Righteousness and goodness are compromised if evil is tolerated, ignored, and overlooked, especially when one has the power to resist wickedness. Even though judgment is often thought to be cruel, the opposite is the case. An authority who indulgently allows evil to occur without any consequence is not righteous but wicked. Thus, the psalmist praises Yahweh,

God is a righteous judge,
and a God who feels indignation every day. (Ps. 7:11)

The cause-and-effect logic already noted stands out again. Since God is righteous, evil that is perpetrated must have a response, and God’s response is a daily occurrence.

This is not to say, of course, that all evil is judged immediately, since God is also merciful, and the relation between justice and mercy must also be taken into account. The relationship between judgment and mercy is complex, and it can’t be reduced to a formula, since mercy can’t be calculated through a mathematical equation. It suffices to say that justice and wrath are not enemies but friends, not adversaries but allies. God’s wrath is an expression and manifestation of his justice.

Nor is God's judgment superficial, since he tests "the minds and hearts" (Ps. 7:9). His judgments penetrate to the heart of the matter; they square with the intentions and motives that animate human beings since, as one who is infinitely wise and infinitely knowledgeable, he knows the thoughts and motives of all. As Proverbs 16:2 says,

All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes,
but the LORD weighs the spirit.

All of this is to say that the Lord's judgments are truly righteous. He doesn't judge from a partial perspective. He judges with infinite wisdom and knowledge as one who sees and knows all of reality, including the actions of human beings and the motives behind the actions.

God Is Just

Justice and righteousness overlap semantically, and this is evident since the word "justice" was used several times in the previous discussion. We should not drive a wedge between the terms. They are overlapping synonyms: justice means that God is fair, equitable, and good. Isaiah declares,

The LORD of hosts is exalted in justice,
and the Holy God shows himself holy in righteousness. (Isa. 5:16)

As with holiness and righteousness, justice isn't a virtue to which God conforms. Instead, God *is* just; he is intrinsically and inherently righteous so that justice constitutes God's very being. Psalm 89:14 avers, "Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne."

Because God is just, we are not surprised to read that he loves justice (Ps. 33:5) and that he delights in justice (Jer. 9:24), which is really another way of saying that the Lord delights in himself since he enshrines perfection. The Lord doesn't need anyone to teach or instruct him about the nature of justice; rather, his very being is just (Isa. 40:14). As Isaiah 61:8 says,

I the LORD love justice;
I hate robbery and wrong.

Loving justice means that the converse is also the case. God hates all injustice, referring to any situation where human beings are oppressed, mistreated, or abused. The Lord hates injustice because it is ugly, defacing, deforming, and devastating, contrary to the character of God himself.

Since God is just and righteous, his judgments are fair (Pss. 9:8; 67:4; 96:13; 98:9). Such statements may be easily passed over as we read them; they seem quite obvious to those who read Scripture. Still, these affirmations are fundamental and critical since they show that biblical writers were concerned about whether God's judgments were equitable and warranted. The Lord is just, so he will come to the aid of those in covenant with him who are beleaguered and mistreated.

With righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth. (Isa. 11:4)

The Lord's intervention for the poor and oppressed among his people is a common theme (Pss. 82:2–4; 103:6; 140:12; 146:7; Ezek. 34:20, 22).⁹ The Lord judges according to a standard, according to what people do (Ezek. 7:3, 8; 18:30). In other words, his judgment is retributive so that people are recompensed according to their behavior, according to what they have done.¹⁰ In his prayer when the temple was built, Solomon sums up God's standard of judgment: "Hear in heaven and act and judge your servants, condemning the guilty by bringing his conduct on his own head, and vindicating the righteous by rewarding him according to his righteousness" (1 Kings 8:32). God's justice means that everyone

⁹ The poor among God's people, of course, are also wicked in and of themselves and, therefore, deserve judgment. But in the texts noted above, the poor are those saved by the mercy of God who now live in ways that please God; thus, they are rewarded for their righteousness. Such a reward is just, but since their obedience is imperfect, the reward is also merciful.

¹⁰ On this theme, see also Morris, *The Biblical Doctrine of Judgment*, 47–48.

receives his or her due, everyone is assessed by the same standard. No one receives a raw deal.

Still, people questioned God's justice. The cynics of Malachi's day queried, "Where is the God of justice?" (Mal. 2:17). Job is reproved, even though he was mainly in the right in his debate with his friends, for questioning God's justice and exalting his own (Job 8:3; 34:12; 40:8). Habakkuk's prophecy opens a fascinating window on God's justice. The book begins with Habakkuk lamenting the violence, injustice, and lawlessness in the southern kingdom of Judah (Hab. 1:2–4). The Lord's failure to respond in judgment surprises and even scandalizes Habakkuk, from which we see incidentally that the Lord is patient, doesn't judge immediately, and gives people time to repent. Still, the Lord answers Habakkuk's query, affirming that he will judge Judah by means of the fierce and relentless Babylonian armies (Hab. 1:5–11). God's answer plunges Habakkuk into a deeper quandary, since the Babylonians were known for their godlessness and ferocity. The prophet questions God's justice since a nation that was more evil than Judah would be the agent of judgment (Hab. 1:12–17). The Lord answers this query in Habakkuk 2, assuring the prophet that the day of Babylon's judgment would also come. Habakkuk paints a complex picture of God's judgment so that we eschew simplistic formulas in our conception of justice. God's judgment isn't the only dimension of God's nature and character. He is also patient and merciful and, thus, doesn't judge immediately, reserving in his wisdom the time when judgment is right. Human beings cannot and do not see the whole picture; every facet of reality isn't disclosed to us, and thus we cannot assess when judgment should be levied. The timing of judgment, then, must be left to God, and human beings must not dictate to him when judgment should be carried out.

We think of the destruction of the Canaanites that occurred when Israel inherited the land under Joshua. Many questions about the occupation arise that can't be unpacked and discussed here. We do know the land of Canaan was promised to Abram much earlier, but the Lord informs Abram that the promise will not be realized for four generations since "the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete" (Gen.

15:16). We should note the timing of the judgment. Even in Abram's day, the Amorites were evil, and yet their evil had not yet reached the level that warranted expulsion and destruction. God explained to Abram that the day of reckoning was coming, a day when the expulsion, annihilation, and destruction of the Amorites would be just and righteous, a day when their sins deserved complete removal from the land. The account of the Canaanites and the words in Genesis 15:16 reveal that biblical writers were aware that such a judgment needed an explanation and that drastic measures were needed for drastic situations. At the end of the day, God is the Lord of life and death, determining the destiny of every person. Every question we ask isn't answered, but the fundamental question is whether we will trust in God's goodness and righteousness in his rule over the world.

God's righteous judgment as it is explained in Habakkuk may raise other questions, such as how God can use the Babylonians, who are even more wicked than Judah, to judge his people. The Lord doesn't rebuke Habakkuk for asking the question, revealing that questions are acceptable and natural. They are not rejected as unreasonable when raised with the right spirit and tone.¹¹ Still, the Lord's plan to enact justice may provoke objections and questions that can't be resolved immediately, especially when nations and people that are shockingly corrupt are the agents. Ultimately, every person and nation will be assessed fairly and proportionately, but much is hidden from us so that we typically don't perceive the equity of his judgment (or perhaps even the reality of it) during our earthly sojourn.

Such reflections bring us to one of the most famous judgments in the Bible and in history, where the Lord rained fire and brimstone down on Sodom, Gomorrah, and a couple of smaller cities (Gen. 19). The angel of the Lord informed Abraham about what was looming for Sodom and Gomorrah because of its wickedness (Gen. 18). Upon learning what

11 We see this dynamic in the questions raised by Zechariah and Mary in Luke's Gospel. See Thomas R. Schreiner, *Luke*, in *Matthew–Luke*, vol. 8 of *ESV Expository Commentary*, ed. Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 731, 736.

was in store for Sodom, Abraham interceded, entreating the Lord to spare the city if there were fifty righteous people, then forty-five, then forty, then thirty, then twenty—all the way down to ten. Each time, the Lord assured Abraham that he would spare the city if the requisite number of righteous were reached. In Genesis 19, of course, the cities were obliterated, but several features of God’s justice stand out as the prayer of Abraham is answered.

First, no one suffers the judgment who didn’t deserve it. It becomes apparent that there was only one righteous person in the city—namely, Lot. There were not even the ten that Abraham hoped and prayed lived there. Still, the Lord answered Abraham’s prayer in that he did not “sweep away the righteous with the wicked” (Gen. 18:23). He rescued the one righteous person in the city, and thus he went beyond what Abraham asked or thought (Eph. 3:20). We are comforted and assured that no one is judged unfairly. God spares any who turn away from evil. Also, the evil of Sodom and Gomorrah had accumulated for a long time. God is patient; he didn’t judge immediately. Even in judgment, he also shows mercy. Even though Lot was the only righteous person in Sodom, he was spared from judgment since he was a righteous person (cf. 2 Pet. 2:7–9).¹²

Second, another way of putting it is reflected in Abraham’s intercession. Abraham’s intercession is amazingly bold and frank, sounding almost like a reproof of God when he says about the possible destruction of the cities, “Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” (Gen. 18:25). Abraham’s words reveal an important truth about God’s justice, one that seems elementary but that is also vital. God doesn’t treat the righteous and the wicked in the same way. Judgment is meted out only and exclusively to the wicked. The reason for this is that God,

12 Scripture also teaches that no one is righteous, that all fall short, that all are sinners (Rom. 3:9–20, 23). What we see in Genesis and 2 Peter is that Lot has been changed (though not perfectly) by God’s grace; his life, despite his shortcomings, is appropriately described as “righteous.”

as the Judge of the whole earth, does what is just and right. No one anywhere will face final punishment who doesn't deserve it. We don't need to worry about whether some will be excluded from God's presence unfairly, for we will see on the final day that God's judgments are just. We will not object about the recompense assigned to any person. We will see more clearly than we do now the righteousness of God's judgments, and thus we are summoned to trust God's character and God's justice, as we consider his judgments in history and at the final judgment.

Third, God discloses to Abraham, as his covenant partner, his intention to destroy the cities of the plain. In doing so he invited Abraham to pray, to intercede, to ask God to spare those who are in the right. In the wisdom of God, human beings play a role and participate in what happens in history. We are not the final judge, and we are certainly not the Lord, but neither are we pieces on a chess board nor puppets in God's plan. We play a vital and mysterious role as the Lord works out his will and righteous judgments in the world. As New Testament believers, we proclaim the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ to those who are separated from God, inviting them to put their faith in Christ and to escape the judgment to come.

Fourth, the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah was a temporal judgment, a judgment in history, but the New Testament picks up the story and applies what happened in history typologically to the final judgment (Matt. 10:15; 11:23–24; Luke 10:12; 17:29; 2 Pet. 2:6; Jude 7). We saw that New Testament writers picked up this same theme relative to the flood as well. Judgments in history point to and anticipate the final judgment. We must be careful, of course, since it isn't necessarily the case that all those who perish in temporal judgments will also be judged eternally. But the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah is typologically escalated in the New Testament so that it becomes an adumbration of the judgment to come.

Fifth, perhaps the saddest words in the narrative about Sodom surface when Lot told his sons-in-law to flee the city since it was destined for destruction. They refused to heed his advice because they thought

that what he said was amusing, that he was joking (Gen. 19:14). These words are poignant because they also reflect the stance of many in our culture today. We may see in a movie or TV show an angry preacher who seems to relish and enjoy telling people that they will go to hell if they don't repent. Many of our contemporaries respond to such a preacher with amusement and a sense of self-righteousness since the preacher's threats clearly reflect his own vindictiveness and joylessness. But such caricatures don't mean that there isn't a judgment—as many seem to think today. Satan has convinced many that any threat of judgment is merely a joke. In doing so, he has the last laugh, which is tragic indeed.

Conclusion

We see in the Old Testament that God's judgments are anchored in his holiness, his justice, and his righteousness. God's justice isn't vindictive, arbitrary, whimsical, or capricious. Nor does God strike out in judgment immediately. He longs to show mercy, inviting people to repent, giving them time to turn back to him. This is beautifully expressed by Ezekiel. "For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live" (Ezek. 18:32). Isaiah reminds us that judgment is the Lord's "strange work . . . his alien task" (Isa. 28:21 NIV). We should not misinterpret the latter statement. It is not as if judgment doesn't accord with who God is—his holiness and justice. The point is that the Lord doesn't delight in judgment in the same way that he delights in mercy, in grace, or in saving his people. We see the same truth in Lamentations 3:33: God "does not afflict from his heart or grieve the children of men." Certainly, there are mysteries about God's sovereign plans, purposes, and being that we can't attend to here.¹³ In any case, the Lord's patience doesn't last forever. Evil can't be tolerated indefinitely. There comes a day when evil will be reckoned with—when it will be judged and when people

13 For instance, I think divine simplicity accords with the biblical witness, but that subject will not be examined here. For a helpful discussion of the simplicity of God, see, e.g., Scott R. Swain, *The Trinity: An Introduction*, SSST (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 53–63.

will receive the consequences for what they deserve. We see this in the Old Testament as historical judgments are righteously meted out to those who gave themselves to evil. These judgments in history forecast the final judgment, the day to come, when all will stand before God.

