

The

BLOOD



OF ABEL

**Vengeance
and
the Grace of God**

Charles White

REFERENCES

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PREFACE

What do the words "vengeance" and "retribution" say to you? The dictionary defines vengeance as "the return of an injury for an injury, in punishment of an injury or offense". Retribution is identified as "merited requital" or "paying back what is deserved, either reward or punishment".

The expression "merited requital" seems to get at the heart of both vengeance and retribution. It is the point where they join. When God exercises his righteous vengeance, he does so in retribution, dealing out deserved punishment. In the same manner, when he determines blessings upon godly people, he often does so in retribution for obedience. While we remember that God's grace determines blessings that can never be deserved, we will also see that his goodness is directed specifically to those who do his will. "What a man sows, that shall he also reap" is a principle we shall see constantly at work.

When I was beginning this study, a brother happened to ask me what my current projects were. I told him that I was studying the theme of vengeance in the Bible. There was a long silence, during which I could almost hear the wheels turning in his mind. Then he asked me simply, "Why vengeance?"

Why indeed? I began to check into the reason this subject had attracted my attention. It had all begun one day as I was reading Romans 12, and came upon verse 19:

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord. (NRSV)

This is one of those familiar passages that I have always thought I knew well. But when I read it that day, it seemed to reach out to grab me, requiring that I ponder it from a different angle. I read the verse again, and it said to me: 1) You are not to take personal vengeance; but, at the same time, 2) **there is a definite place for vengeance in the plan of God.**

All Christians know that vengeance is forbidden to us. We are to love our enemies and do good to those who persecute us, according to the teaching of Jesus. Alas, when we consider on one hand that we are not to take vengeance, and on the other that we are to do good to our enemies, we easily fall into the trap of thinking, however unconsciously, that vengeance in itself is necessarily and intrinsically wrong. Romans 12:19 seems to say otherwise. Consider these words of J.C. Sproul:

Because God forbids us from carrying out vengeance, we easily leap to the conclusion that vengeance is evil. On the contrary, vengeance is an expression of justice (...). If vengeance were intrinsically evil, then it would be as wicked for God to exact vengeance as it is for us to seek it ourselves.¹

I was one of those who felt that vengeance was inherently evil. The simple mention of the word brought negative images to my mind. I therefore set about to read the Bible with a mind to look at vengeance and retribution in the accomplishment of God's plan for mankind; the book you are about to read is the result of this search. It is worth noting that in my research I found no fewer than 2200 verses of the Bible that touch on this point, directly or indirectly. It is evident that over the centuries, the God of the universe has applied established principles of retribution in order to make his paths plain and teach mankind of his unfailing holiness.

Not only has he used vengeance and retribution to accomplish his will, but in the process he has joined these principles with those we talk about most, i.e. grace, forgiveness, reconciliation, atonement, propitiation, love. We will see that the wrath of God toward sin is inseparable from and indispensable to the salvation of his people. His very goodness to us is made possible by his burning hatred of our sin, by his eternal anger toward wrongdoing and wickedness wherever they are found.

All of this is the natural result of his absolute holiness, to which we will be referring, but which is not the primary subject of this book. The world does not know God, and certainly does not comprehend his holiness. But we should not be too quick to criticize the world for that. We who are his own children, who wear his name and call upon him for our salvation, often do not undertake to seize him, or rather to be seized by him, and thus to glimpse, however slightly, the light of his absolute purity. A holy God must not allow anyone or anything to stain his holiness. This is the "raison d'être" of vengeance.

Now, if you do not think this train of thought very attractive, or if you think that a book on the vengeance and retribution of God cannot be very interesting, please, before putting down this book, read chapter four. Though I have put considerable effort into preparing the reader for that chapter, if you would rather not wade through that, just skip it. Though we understand that God, at Calvary, expressed his anger at sin as well as his love for the sinner, we have perhaps not placed it in the context of the vengeance announced for centuries before the cross.

1

CLASSIC EXAMPLES

Examples of vengeance and retribution in the Bible are more than numerous: they are multitudinous. In this chapter, we will look at just a few. We want to see *the fact of vengeance* in the context of the entire will of God. Some of these examples will be further examined in later chapters.

OLD TESTAMENT

Adam and Eve

Man is not yet out of the Garden of Eden before he encounters the vengeance of God. Adam and Eve, for having transgressed the direct command of God not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, are condemned to individual punishments and expelled from their paradise, while the serpent who tempted them is condemned to crawl forever on its belly. And already, the coming one who will right the wrong just done, is announced (Genesis 3:15).

Cain and Abel

After Cain has killed his brother Abel, God declares to him, *Your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground* (Gen 4:10). We must remember this statement, for it will have significant meaning for this study. God responds to the voice of Abel's blood, and curses Cain.

The Flood

When mankind becomes so evil that God actually regrets creating him, vengeance cannot be far away. This vengeance is exacted by means of a terrible cataclysm that actually destroys every human life on earth, with the exception of faithful Noah and his family. How great must have been

the wickedness of man's heart, how dark his spirit must have become, for a loving God to decide upon such relentless annihilation! Indeed, in his grief at man's evil way, God decides to blot him out (Gen 6:7).

The Avenger of Blood

The chilling principle of the avenger of blood had been stated to Noah: *Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed. For in his own image God made humankind* (Gen 9:6). The same law is announced in Numbers 35:33: *You shall not pollute the land in which you live; for blood pollutes the land, and no expiation can be made for the land, for the blood that is shed in it, except by the blood of the one who shed it.*

Hebrew law permitted the avenger of blood, who was apparently the closest relative or perhaps the heir of the deceased, to be the one who put to death the man convicted of the deliberate murder of his kinsman (Num 35:19,21). But how was the guilt of the murderer determined? And what punishment, if any, was determined for the man who killed another by accident?

Anyone who killed another was to go immediately to one of the six cities of refuge designated for this purpose (Kedesh, Shechem, Kiriath-arba, Bezer, Ramoth, Golan). He was to present himself before the elders of the city for a trial (Num 35:12; Josh 20:6). The guilt of the killer could not be established on the testimony of only one witness (Num 35:30), and especially, we are to presume, if the one witness were the avenger of blood! If, however, the killer was determined to have acted deliberately, the elders of the city were to turn him over to the avenger of blood for execution (Deut 19:11).

The killer found innocent of deliberate intention was accorded asylum in the city and was thus protected from the avenger. But it was formally forbidden him, under penalty of death, to leave the city of refuge before the death of the current high priest (Num 35:28). If he chose to leave his "safe" city, the avenger could kill him *without incurring any blood guilt* (Num 35:27).

This arrangement indicates that, at least in this context, God recognized a right of vengeance for shed blood, and that he gave this right to the next of kin. But he allowed it to be exercised only within the limits

of strict adherence to a legal code that required witnesses, a trial, and a formal judgment.

The Amalekites

As Moses is leading Israel out of Egypt, they are attacked by Amalek at Rephidim. During this battle, as long as Moses holds up his hand, Israel prevails; when from weariness he lowers it, Amalek takes control of the fight. So Moses sits down and Aaron and Hur hold up both of his hands until the sun sets. Israel thus wins the battle, under the capable leadership of Joshua (Ex17:8-13). Immediately following this incident, God tells Moses: *I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven* (Ex17:14). This prophecy is to be written in a book and remembered.

Upon arrival at Sinai, Moses ascends to the mountain top to receive the word of the Lord. Among his many instructions, are these:

Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey out of Egypt, how he attacked you on the way, when you were faint and weary, and struck down all who lagged behind you; he did not fear God. (...). You shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; do not forget.

Deut 25:17-19

Several hundred years later, during the reign of Saul, the first king of Israel, this prophecy is accomplished. Through his prophet Samuel, God gives the following instructions to the king:

Thus says the LORD of hosts, "I will punish the Amalekites for what they did in opposing the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey."

1 Sam15:2-3

Most Bible students know this story. Saul defeats the Amalekites, utterly destroying all the people, but sparing the king, Agag, and the best of the animals. And for this lack of stringent obedience to the announced will of God, he loses his throne and his place in the heart of God.

To obey is better than sacrifice, Samuel tells him, and to heed than the fat of rams. We know this passage well, but do we know that its context is the vengeance of God upon a whole nation? Saul is punished because he does not carry out to the full a death sentence of God upon a wicked people. The sentence had been pronounced by the Lord himself. And woe to him, be he the king of Israel, who would pretend to alter the announced will of the Lord in the matter.

We must understand, then, that the vengeance of the Lord is serious business. When he announces it, we must not take him lightly, and when he executes it, we must not pretend to obscure his plans.

Abimelech

The death of Abimelech, from a millstone dropped by a woman from the tower of Shechem, is called a retribution from God: *Thus God repaid (some versions say requited) Abimelech for the crime he committed against his father in killing his seventy brothers; and God also made all the wickedness of the people of Shechem fall back on their heads, and on them came the curse of Jotham son of Jerubbaal.* (Judg 9:56-57).

Jehu

In 2 Kings 9-10, we have the interesting story of a young man named Jehu, chosen by God to execute vengeance upon the house of Ahab and on the wicked Jezebel.

A prophet from Elisha first anoints Jehu king over Israel, then gives him his instructions:

You shall strike down the house of your master Ahab, so that I may avenge on Jezebel the blood of my servants the prophets, and the blood of all the servants of the LORD. For the whole house of Ahab shall perish. (...) The dogs shall eat Jezebel (...) and no one shall bury her.

2 Kings 9: 7-9

After delivering this awful message to the future king and avenger of God's people, the prophet *opened the door and fled*. It was doubtless apparent to him that this man would be, in God's hands, a terrible instrument of vengeance, and he didn't want to be anywhere near when it all began! Besides that, he was also following directions (cf. 2 Kings 9:3).

And so the carnage begins. Jehu first kills king Joram of Israel, son of Ahab, in retribution, says he, for the blood of Naboth and his children. Then Ahazia, king of Juda, is executed in turn.

Next, it is Jezebel's turn. Jehu comes to Jezreel and finds Jezebel looking out of the palace window. He commands her to be thrown down, which the queen's eunuchs seem only too eager to do. Jezebel's blood splatters on the wall and on the horses, which trample on her. Later, when they go out to bury her, they find nothing but her skull, her feet and the palms of her hands. This, Jehu says, is the word of the Lord, the accomplishment of his vengeance (see also 1 Kings 21:23; 2 Kings 9:7-9).

But the vengeance is not at its end. Jehu then has all seventy of Ahab's sons beheaded, then he slaughters the remainder of the house of Ahab, all his great men, his friends, and his priests. Next, he goes from Jezreel to Samaria and destroys the entire family of Ahaziah, sparing no one. He also searches out and kills all of Ahab's kinsmen who live in Samaria.

There remains one last phase of this terrible retribution of the Lord. With lucid cunning, Jehu gathers all of the prophets of Baal, with all the worshipers and priests. After assuring himself that no worshiper of the Lord is present, he encourages the people of Baal to worship their god. Then, with eighty men as executioners, he orders that all the worshipers be destroyed. When this is done, the pillar and the temple of the false god are burned and demolished.

Though Jehu is not faithful in everything before the Lord (see 2 Kings 10:28,31), in this assigned vengeance he carries out his task to God's satisfaction. Here is the Lord's assessment of his work:

Because you have done well in carrying out what I consider right, and in accordance with all that was in my heart have dealt with the house of Ahab, your sons of the fourth generation shall sit on the throne of Israel.

2 Kings 10:30

Here, then, is an gripping example of the Lord's retribution upon evil persons, their evil families and the evil worshipers of a false god. Jehu was assigned a difficult and particularly gruesome task. He carried it out with zeal, and was rewarded by the Lord for his careful attention to the details of God's vengeance.

The Captivity

Even a cursory reading of the prophets convinces us easily that the deportations of Samaria in 722 B.C., and of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., are acts of retaliation, or retribution, from God. Listen to Isaiah 10:5-6:

*Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger —
The club in their hands is my fury!
Against a godless nation I send him,
and against the people of my wrath I send him.*

Hosea, speaking at about the same time, declares:

*Though they offer choice sacrifices,
though they eat flesh,
the LORD does not accept them.
Now he will remember their iniquity,
and punish their sin.* 8:13

I will destroy you, O Israel. 13:9

In Judah, Jeremiah is assigned the task of announcing the coming doom of Jerusalem:

*I am going to bring disaster on this people, the
fruit of their schemes, because they have not given
heed to my words; as for my teaching, they have
rejected it.*

6:19

This city has aroused my anger and wrath, from the day it was built until this day, so that I will remove it from my sight, because of all the evil of the people of Israel and the people of Judah.

32:31

When God brings destruction upon his people, sending them into a difficult and nation-rending captivity, he is in fact fulfilling centuries of predictions concerning them, generations of warnings based on his foreknowledge of Israel's hardness of heart. He is punishing them for their wickedness and executing his vengeance upon an unfaithful people. We shall look more closely into this phenomenon in chapter 3.

NEW TESTAMENT

The Gospels

Early in the New Testament, John the Baptist announces that the coming Messiah will *clear his threshing floor and burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire* (Lk 3:17). This is doubtless a reference to the retributory aspect of the Messiah's mission. It is also a sign that the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament are one and the same. This seems to be J. I. Packer's point when he says:

People who do not actually read the Bible confidently assure us that when we move from the Old Testament to the New, the theme of divine judgment fades into the background; but if we examine the New Testament, even in the most cursory way, we find at once that the Old Testament emphasis on God's action as Judge, far from being reduced is actually intensified. The entire New Testament is overshadowed by the certainty of a coming day of universal judgment, and by the problem thence arising; how may we sinners get right with God while there is yet time?¹

Jesus speaks of a place he calls *outer darkness* and where there will be *weeping and gnashing of teeth* (Mt 8:12, for example). He threatens the hypocritical Pharisees with being sentenced to *hell* (Mt 23:33), and Chorazin and Bethsaida with *the day of judgment* (Mt 11:21-22). How can we overlook the enormous and ominous meaning of these threats? We will look at Jesus' doctrine of hell and eternal punishment in chapter 5.

Jesus indicates in John 12:31 that his coming is in itself a judgment on the world; in John 5:27-29 that this judgment has been given to him by his father, and that he will exercise it by granting either eternal life or eternal condemnation; in John 3:18 that those who reject the light that the only Son brings will bring this judgment on themselves; and in John 12:48 that the word that he has spoken will judge the incredulous in the last day. Even the blessed text that begins, *For God so loved the world* indicates that there is a judgment in store. When Jesus says, *so that everyone who believes on him may not perish*, he is demonstrating a possible outcome of that judgment.

Confirming this, Paul in Athens speaks of a day that God has *fixed* and in which the world will be *judged in righteousness* by the man appointed, Jesus, who has been raised from the dead (Ac 17:31). Indeed, the Scriptures call Jesus the *judge of the living and the dead* (Ac 10:42; 2 Tim 4:1; 1 Pet 4:5), and *the Judge (...) standing at the doors* (Jas 5:9).

Even the blessed text that begins, *For God so loved the world* indicates that there is a judgment in store.

All of this agrees with the prophecies of the coming Messiah, who is said to break with a rod of iron those who would rise against him, and break them like a potter's vessel (Ps 2:9), so that no one could stand or endure when he appeared (Mal 3:2).

Listen to this terrible judge as he weeps over the wicked city of Jerusalem and announces God's vengeance on her:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem! the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it. How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you, desolate.

Mt 23:37-38

Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.

Lk 19:41-44

Jesus was in fact announcing a double retribution upon unbelieving Israel: the end of Jewish "favored nation" status (see Rom 2:28-29; 9:6-7; Phil 3:3) and, as a dramatic sign of this, the total destruction of its holy city and its sanctuary (see Dan 9:26).

In Luke 21:22 Jesus refers to the destruction of Jerusalem as

. . . days of vengeance, as a fulfillment of all that is written.

According to Josephus, the great Jewish historian, 1,100,000 people perished during the siege of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., and 97,000 were taken captive. Of the latter, many were tortured and murdered by crucifixion, till "room was wanting for the crosses, and crosses wanting for the bodies."²

And what is the reason for this vengeance? Jesus had announced it clearly: the people had not recognized the day of God's Messiah. But, lest we mistake this expression for an indication of honest, sincere error, notice again the words of Jesus in Matthew: *You were not willing!* This was not a coincidental miscalculation or an understandable error, but

rather a deliberate, prideful refusal to submit to the Prophet the people had been expecting for centuries, for the simple reason that he did not conform to their non-covenant traditions.

Peter leans heavily on this flat rejection, in Acts 2:36:

Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.

And those who grasped the weight of his words were seized with terror at this truth (Ac 2:37):

Brethren, what shall we do?

Indeed, when their Messiah was on trial before the Roman authorities, the Jews had even clamored that *his blood be on us and on our children!* (Mt 27:25), and that they had no king but the emperor (Jn 19:15).

The destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. was the retribution of God upon a stiff-necked and hard-headed people. He had announced in advance the vengeance they should suffer for the rejection and execution of their Messiah. And that vengeance came, inevitably.

Acts and the Epistles

Now, let us consider, rapidly and in condensed form, other New Testament teachings about retribution:

Positive retribution

- | | |
|-----------|--|
| Jas 1:3: | Endurance is a retribution for faith tested. |
| Jas 1:12: | The crown of life is a retribution for temptation endured. |
| Jas 1:25: | Blessings are the retribution of persevering and doing. |
| Jas 2:23: | The retribution of belief is justification. |

- Jas 3:18:** The retribution of peacemaking is peace.
- Jas 4:8:** The retribution of drawing near to God is that God will draw near to us.
- Jas 5:7:** The retribution of patience is the harvest.
- 1 Pet 1:9:** The retribution of faith is salvation.
- 1 Pet 3:9:** The retribution of righteousness is access to God through prayer.
- 1 Jn 4:18:** The retribution of love is freedom from fear.
- Rev 2:7:** The retribution of the conqueror is life.
- Rev 2:10-11:** The retribution of being faithful until death is life, not being harmed by second death.
- Rev 2:17:** The retribution of conquering is hidden manna and a white stone with a new name.
- Rev 2:26:** The retribution of conquering is authority.
- Rev 2:28:** The retribution of conquering is the morning star.
- Rev 3:5:** The retribution of conquering is to be clothed in white, to have one's name written in the book of life, to have Jesus confess one's name before the Father.
- Rev 3:12:** The retribution of conquering is to be made a pillar in the temple, to receive the name of God and that of the city of God, and the name of Jesus.
- Rev 3:21:** The retribution of conquering is a place with Jesus on this throne.

Rev 14:13: The retribution of faithful service is rest from labors.

Negative retribution:

Ac 5:1-11: Ananias and Saphira, for lying to the Holy Spirit, are punished by death.

Ac 12:20-23: Herod, for his pride, is struck by an angel of the Lord and dies.

Ac 13:8ff: Elymas is struck blind for his opposition to the Gospel.

Rom 1:24-25: The depravity of the pagan world is said to be the result of the fact that God has "given them up" because they have *changed the truth about God for a lie and served the creature rather than the Creator.*

1 Cor 3:16: The Christian as temple of God is holy, says Paul. Those who destroy the temple of God will be destroyed.

2 Tim 4:14: Alexander the coppersmith, who did much harm to Paul, will be paid back for his deeds. Evil deeds will be paid back by the Lord.

Heb 3:10: The doubt of a people delayed for a generation the realization of God's will for them.

Heb 6:4-8: Apostates cannot be restored. They are the thorns and thistles that must be burned, not recultivated.

Jas 1:15: The retribution for temptation succumbed to is death.

Jas 2:13: Those who show no mercy will receive no mercy.

- Jas 4:3:** The retribution for asking wrongly is to not receive.
- Jas 4:4:** The retribution for friendship with the world is enmity with God.
- Jas 5:3:** The retribution for placing confidence in riches is destruction.
- 1 Pet 3:9:** The retribution for evil is that God turns his face from us.
- 1 Pet 2:1:** The retribution for denying the Master who bought us is swift destruction.
- Rev 2:16:** The retribution for refusal to repent of sin is Jesus coming against us with the sword of his mouth.

These examples should suffice to show us that there is a definite theme of retribution running through the pages of the sacred text. More than this, that the place for vengeance and retribution in the plan of God for man is confirmed. The next chapter will attempt to identify the principles at work within this context, so that we may get a better handle on the phenomenon itself.

2

THE PRINCIPLES OF PROPORTIONALITY AND IMPARTIALITY

Reading the Bible through in search of "vengeance" passages is an eye-opening, mind-expanding, faith-broadening experience. The Word of God seems to develop several principles at work in this area. The first of these, and perhaps the most important, is the principle of reciprocity, which we will examine in chapter three.

The two other principles we will examine in this context will be called proportionality and impartiality. All of these principles are complementary, so that it is impossible to talk about one without getting into certain aspects of the others. But we will try to look at them separately, in order to gain the fullest possible understanding of their functions in God's plan.

PROPORTIONALITY - Old Testament

This principle, simply stated, maintains that with God the punishment, or retribution, always fits the crime — that vengeance, when needed, is never more severe than is called for.

The *Lex Talionis*, the levitical law of retribution, is enunciated in Leviticus 24:19-20:

Anyone who maims another shall suffer the same injury in return: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; the injury inflicted is the injury to be suffered.

This sounds harsh and even cruel to the modern mind. But in fact it is a law of equilibrium, designed to curb passions and to limit the degree of punishment to the severity of the crime. The object is not, as it might seem, to sacrifice the second eye or the second tooth, but indeed to save them both.

It must be remembered that the law of retaliation was given not to individuals, but to courts and judges. No one was permitted to take this law into his own hands and use it as an authorization for personal revenge. This point is well borne out by J. A. Motyer in his commentary on Amos:

The *Lex Talionis* is often denigrated as a by-gone savagery, but it is nothing of the sort; it is the safeguard of equal, even-handed justice; it states that crime and punishment must balance each other exactly. It would have been a good thing for England if the *Lex Talionis* had been honoured in the days when people were hanged for sheep-stealing. In all its contexts in the Old Testament this principle of exact justice belongs to the law-courts; it is for the guidance of magistrates. The Lord Jesus was correcting an abuse in Mt 5:38 whereby it had been advocated as a principle for private revenge in personal relationships.¹

When we hear the expression, "an eye for an eye," we inevitably conjure up images of cruel retaliation and harsh, unnecessary vengeance. The law of the talion was in fact designed to avoid such cruelty and to provide a legal system in which punishment was geared to the crime, and in which the tendency of men to overreact would be constantly controlled. True proportion could thus be maintained.

In a dramatic incident of the Old Testament, the Kohathite Uzzah touches the ark of the covenant, which is tottering on its wagon. He dies instantly, stricken by the hand of the Lord (1 Chr 13:9-10). Is not this an over-reaction? Must a man be put to death for preventing the precious ark from falling from the ox-cart? Was not Uzzah's gesture well-intentioned?

The principle at work is one of proportion. While no one could question Uzzah's good intentions, it must be remembered that God had strictly decreed that any person not of the house of Aaron, who should

touch the holy things, would die (Num 4:15-20). The ark and the various tabernacle objects were impregnated with the holiness of God. To touch them in any circumstance, especially after the formal prohibition had been decreed, was therefore not only to disobey, but to expose oneself to the terrible vengeance of a holy God. Uzzah died because he could not touch the ark without touching, figuratively speaking, God himself.

After King Josiah's reforms, listed in 2 Kings 23, it is said that *still the LORD did not turn from the fierceness of his great wrath* (2 Kings 23:26). Why? The list of things Josiah had done was impressive. He had humbled himself and his people before God, read in the people's hearing the newly-found book of the law, and made a covenant with the Lord to keep his statutes. He had, in addition, burned the temple vessels made for Baal, deposed the priests of Baal, burned and destroyed the image of Asherah, broken down the houses of the male temple prostitutes, broken and defiled the high places used for idol worship, destroyed the altar of Topheth in the valley of Ben-hinnom, where the people sacrificed their children to the fire of the false god Molech.

But this was not all. He also removed the horse statues dedicated to the sun and placed at the entrance of the temple, burned the chariots of the sun, pulled down and destroyed the altars of Ahaz and Manasseh, defiled the high places east of Jerusalem built by Solomon for Astarte, Chemosh and Milcom, breaking down the pillars and cutting the poles, strewing human bones over the whole site.

But still Josiah hadn't finished. He pulled down the altar erected by Jeroboam at Bethel, burning and defiling this high place; he burned bones from the surrounding tombs on the altar, in accomplishment of a prophecy made long before (see 1 Kings 13:2); he removed all of the shrines in Samaria, slaughtering on the altars all of the priests of those shrines, defiling the altars with their bones.

Was he through now? Not at all. He prescribed and kept a Passover celebration unlike any since the days of the judges. Then he put away all mediums, wizards, and false gods.

Of Josiah it is then said, *Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the LORD with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him* (2 Kings 23:25). If this is so, then why does the next verse, which we have already seen, say that God remained angry with Judah?

Why does God go on to say:

I will remove Judah also out of my sight, as I have removed Israel; and I will reject this city that I have chosen, Jerusalem, and the house of which I said, My name shall be there.
2 Kings 23:27

The answer to our question lies in the principle of proportionality. A new wall built around a burning house will still burn with the house. Josiah's reforms, though significant, could not make up for generations of faithlessness and rebellion. They were too little, too late, and God was no longer inclined to accept them in exchange for saving Jerusalem. There was a principle of proportion to be respected which would not be satisfied until Judah had spent 70 years in captivity to the Babylonians (see Jer 25:10-11; 29:10).

The commentator Adam Clarke makes an interesting point concerning these 70 years of deportation. He points out that in the book of Leviticus, God tells Israel of its coming captivity, and declares that during that time *the land shall enjoy its sabbath years* (Lev 26:34). Clarke goes on to say that the period covering from Saul, the first king of Israel, to the Babylonian captivity, was about 490 years, or 70 sabbath years, an indication that God imposed 70 years of captivity because this period corresponded to one year for every sabbath year neglected by Israel.² Whatever the significance of the 70 years of captivity decreed upon Judah, it seems evident that a certain proportion is being taken into account.

**A new wall built around a burning
house will still burn with the house.**

When God through Isaiah (63:10), Ezekiel (14:9-11) and especially Jeremiah (Jer 30:11-14) declares that he has become Israel's enemy, he is doubtless using this principle of proportion. He seems to be saying that Israel has been so unfaithful, so rebellious, for so long, that the only role he can reasonably assume is that of the enemy. Jeremiah 30:14 declares:

*All your lovers have forgotten you;
They care nothing for you;
for I have dealt you the blow of an enemy,
the punishment of a merciless foe,
because your guilt is great,
because your sins are so numerous.*

God even says in verse 24 of this chapter that *the fierce anger of the LORD will not turn back until he has executed and accomplished the intents of his mind. In the latter days you will understand this.*

We must not miss the heavy significance of this declaration. The Lord says that his anger is fierce, and that he will not turn back from it until he has accomplished proportionally what he has in mind, something that will be understood *in the latter days*, the biblical expression for the end times, that is, the messianic period in which we are presently living (Heb 1:1-3). What exactly are the intents of God's mind as expressed through Jeremiah, for the messianic period? The answer to this question is sewn into this text all along. Here are two examples:

*I will restore health to you,
and your wounds I will heal (...).
I am going to restore the fortunes
of the tents of Jacob.*

Jer 30:17-18

*The days are surely coming, says the LORD,
when I will make a new covenant with the house
of Israel and with the house of Judah. (...) I will
put my law within them, and I will write it on their
hearts (...); for I will forgive their iniquity, and
remember their sin no more.*

Jer 31:31 ff.

In the context of his anger, and of his intentions for the messianic age, God speaks of a coming new covenant and of forgiveness of sin. We have here an indication of the link that can and indeed must necessarily be established between the vengeance of God upon an unfaithful people, and the grace of God to those same people, and to the lost of all nations.

We will be looking closely at this link in Chapter 4.

PROPORTIONALITY - New Testament

Notice how some of the sayings of Jesus and his apostles reflect this principle of proportionality. Jesus says in Luke 6:38, speaking about judgment and mercy, that *the measure you give will be the measure you get back*. In Paul's letter to the Romans, he says in 2:6 concerning the day of the wrath of God that *he will repay according to each one's deeds*. This kind of rule was often repeated in the Old Testament, for example by Ezekiel: *I will judge you according to your ways* (see Ezek 7:3, 8, 9, 13, 27; 9:10, etc.). All of these expressions are different ways of putting the *Lex Talionis*: eye for eye, etc.

Consider now the gravity of a sin so terrible that God will never forgive it. If, according to the principle of proportionality the punishment must fit the crime, and if the punishment consists of never being forgiven, then imagine the awful nature of the crime called *blasphemy against the Spirit* (Mt 12:31). How holy must be the Lord, how holy his Spirit, for God to go to this extreme to punish someone guilty of blaspheming him!

Indeed, in Hebrews 10:29-31, the expression *Vengeance is mine* is cited in the precise context of the punishment due to those who have *profaned the blood of the covenant by which they were sanctified and outraged the Spirit of grace*. This definitely connects the sin of apostasy with the sin against the Holy Spirit. Only a Christian can commit it, for only a Christian has been sanctified. For a greater crime, there must be a greater punishment (Heb 2:1-3; 6:4-8; 10:29). The principle of proportion is at work.

In the same vein, how great must have been the crime of those who had Jesus killed, for him to declare to them that the blood of *all the righteous* (Luke says *all the prophets*) *from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah*, would be charged *upon this generation* (Mt 23:35-36; Lk 11:50-51). We will be looking at this further on.

The principle of proportionality as defined by the Scriptures is too clear to miss. We must see it as an expression of the implacable retribution of God, in return for the good and the evil done by his people.

IMPARTIALITY - Old and New Testaments

The principle of impartiality states that God will deal out his judgments against the guilty, whoever they are.

Look first at the 18th chapter of Ezekiel, where it is clearly stated that *it is only the person who sins that shall die* (Ezek 18:4), not the father for the son, for example, nor the son for the father. This principle is further borne out in the fact that the judgment of God is meted out regardless of previous performance. For example, in Ezekiel 33:10-16, God declares that *the righteousness of the righteous shall not save them when they transgress* (see David, with Bathsheba in 1 Samuel 12, for example), *and the wickedness of the wicked shall not make them stumble when they turn from their wickedness* (see the repentance of Rehoboam in 2 Chr 12:6-7 for an example of this).

In other words, on one hand, a wicked man can turn from his ways and be forgiven—this is the grace of God; and on the other hand, yesterday's righteousness cannot be counted upon to cover up today's wickedness — this is the holiness of God, which is not at all the flip side of his grace, but in fact the reason for it. God's goodness is always available to those who will turn from their sin; but his grace is too precious, the price he paid too extensive, to permit his imputed righteousness to be used as a kind of credit account when one feels like doing wicked things.

This sounds very like Paul's warning to the Galatians: We are *called to freedom*, says the venerable apostle, but we are not to use our freedom as *an opportunity for self-indulgence* (Gal 5:13). The implied message is that if we use our freedom as an excuse to sin, we will lose our salvation. Paul is less subtle on this subject elsewhere in the same epistle. He fairly steams at the Galatian brethren because of their falling back into the law as a means of saving themselves. Anyone, even an angel, says Paul, who brings *another gospel* than that of the grace of Christ is to be accursed (Gal 1:6-9). And anyone who tries to justify himself by works of law has *fallen away from grace* (Gal 5:4).

Does this not indicate an active principle of impartiality? A lost one can be saved, and a saved one can be lost. No spiritual condition before God is automatic, no sin is hopeless (with the exception of blasphemy against the Spirit) and no righteousness is guaranteed.

According to the wise Solomon, God in his impartiality will bring to judgment both *the righteous and the wicked* (Eccl 3:17), and will bring *every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil* (Eccl 12:13). That doesn't leave much room for leverage. According to these two passages, there isn't a thing a man does, whether he is righteous or wicked, whether he does good or evil, whether in public or in private, which will not pass one day before the judge of all the universe.

**God is impartial in his judgments,
even (and perhaps especially)
concerning those who benefit most
from his goodness.**

This theme is echoed by Paul in all of his teaching of the Churches. To the Colossians, speaking to wrongdoers in the Church, Paul declares that each one *will receive back for whatever wrong he has done, and there is no partiality* (Col 3:25). To the Romans he announces that *we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ* (Rom 14:10), and that *God will judge the secret thoughts of all* (Rom 2:16) and *repay according to each one's deeds* (Rom 2:6). *All* means each one, and each one indeed means all. God is impartial in his judgments, even (and perhaps especially) concerning those who benefit most from his goodness.

We must remember that before the Lord held all men equally responsible before him, he had impartially given his blood equally for all men. Remember the poignant prophecy of John the Baptist: *Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!* (Jn 1:29). Though Jesus' mission was first of all to the Jewish people, his mission was to provide the blood that would save every man:

*Jesus is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not
for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole
world.*

1 Jn 2:2

Jesus gave himself a ransom for all.

1 Tim 2:6

God is patient, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. 2 Pet 3:9

Not that every man would come, but that the door was opened to all who would respond to this magnificent gift:

God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. Ac 10:34

The principle of impartiality establishes a solid equilibrium, and this is why it resembles the principle of proportion; God's grace, offered to all, is a wonderful thing. Those who reject it will be held accountable for their unbelief, and even those who believe will be considered responsible for how they treat such a unique treasure. God shows no partiality; he knows and judges the hearts of all men, good and bad.

3

THE PRINCIPLE OF RECIPROCITY

As in the physical realm, there exists also in the spiritual realm a law of reciprocity. The physical manifestation of this phenomenon is best described in terms of Newton's third law of thermodynamics: for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. The Bible gives the definite impression that, in much the same way, every action, good or bad, generates a response, a retribution of sorts — good for good, bad for bad — determined by God and within the limits of his own principles of proportionality and impartiality.

Consider these words of J. I. Packer:

Retribution is the inescapable moral law of creation; God will see that each man sooner or later receives what he deserves—if not here, then hereafter. This is one of the basic facts of life. And, being made in God's image, we all know in our hearts that this is right. This is how it ought to be.¹

In the biblical text, the elaboration of this principle most often employs the words “if/then” and “because/therefore”. “If/then” is used when the text is predicting a certain kind of behavior, usually negative, and is prophesying the results of that behavior. “Because/therefore” generally tells why a certain kind of behavior had the particular results it had.

It is important to note here that at every major junction in the history of Israel, God warns his people against infidelity, not only as a way of exhorting them to righteousness, but also as a means of actually predicting their unfaithfulness and thus constituting a witness against them when their faithlessness does in fact occur. When this happens, then, his actions directed at their rebellion are only made after an explanation of this cause-

effect factor. And after he acts, he again explains the reasons for his intervention.

RECIPROCITY - The Books of Moses

Let us look at several examples of this principle as it is applied to God's rebellious people. (All emphases in this section are mine, CW.)

But, before we look at negative examples, let's look at a positive one. In Genesis 22, when Abraham is asked to sacrifice his only son on Mount Moriyah, he promptly obeys, despite the fact that God has promised to bless all the families of the earth through Isaac (Gen 12:1-3; 13:14-15; 15:4-6), something that will obviously be impossible if the child dies. After God stays Abraham's hand and provides a ram for the sacrifice, he says to his obedient servant:

Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will bless you, and make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven (...), because you obeyed my voice.

Gen 22:16-18

Paul confirms this reciprocity when he declares, quoting Genesis 15:6, that *Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness* (Rom 4:3). The reciprocal factor is very clear in the relationship between Abraham and God, especially on this occasion. God commanded Abraham to do something that required he believe in him. Abraham expressed his belief by obeying God's command and, as a result, God imputed his own righteousness to Abraham.

Now, let's pass on to less positive examples. When God brings his people out of Egypt and leads them to the doors of the promised land, Moses brings down from Sinai the laws and commandments intended to guide Israel in its new territory. Among those laws is this one:

Take care not to make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you are going, or it will become a snare among you.

Ex 34:12

This is an **if/then** pronouncement. Expressed otherwise, it says: *If you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you are going, then it will become a snare among you.* The principle of reciprocity is thus established.

In Leviticus 26, we find further examples of this principle. Read this chapter and see how many times God uses the **if/then** language. Here are two examples:

If you follow my statutes (...) I will give you your rains in their seasons.

Lev 26:3

But if you will not obey me (...) I will bring terror on you.

Lev 26:14

You will discover in your reading of this chapter that the tone rises and that the descriptions of Israel's possible infidelities are in fact prophecies of what will indeed occur. God even describes the coming captivities, and gives the reason for them:

Those of you who survive shall languish in the land of your enemies because of their iniquities (...), because they dared to spurn my ordinances, and they abhorred my statutes.

Lev 26:39, 43

But Israel doesn't wait until it arrives in the promised land to create snares for itself and to activate the reciprocity factor. With Moses still on Sinai receiving this law, the people grow weary of waiting for him, have Aaron build a golden calf, and begin worshipping it with merriment and dancing (Ex 32). On this occasion, but for the bold intervention of Moses, God would have consumed his people to make a nation from Moses. Their deeds deserved this, in fact; instead, Moses sent the Levites among the sinning people to punish them, and about three thousand died.

Numbers 13 and 14 demonstrate to us that the people are still faithless, still lacking in confidence in the Lord when they arrive at the gates of Canaan, about two years after their departure from Egypt. Their twelve spies discover land that is rich but fortified and inhabited by giant men. The people are so afraid that when Joshua and Caleb urge them not

to fear, these faithful ones are threatened with stoning. Reciprocity steps in, and God reacts:

How long will this people despise me? And how long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them? I will strike them with pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they.

Num 14:11-12

Moses flies to their defense, exactly as he had already done at Sinai, asking the Lord to forgive his people. Now, let us notice carefully how the Lord responds on this occasion:

I do forgive, just as you have asked; nevertheless — as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD — none of the people who have seen my glory and the things that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have tested me these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, shall see the land that I swore to give to their ancestors; none of those who despised me shall see it. (...) As I live, says the LORD, I will do to you the very things I heard you say: your dead bodies shall fall in this very wilderness; and of all your number, included in the census, from twenty years old and upward, who have complained against me, not one of you shall come into the land in which I swore to settle you, except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun.

Num 14:20-23, 28-30

We must not fail to see what is happening here. God does forgive his people. Not to forgive them would perhaps mean their immediate destruction. But a principle of reciprocity is at work. They must absolutely bear the consequences of such a grievous fault. And that means that they will not be permitted to enter the promised land. And so, **because** of the rebellion recorded in Numbers 13 and 14, the triumphal entry of Israel into the land that God wants to give them is put off for an entire generation!

Reciprocity can indeed function apart from forgiveness. Often, the effect of a sin will have to be borne, even when the sin itself is forgiven. A murderer can be forgiven by God and the family of the person whose life he has taken; he will still have to spend years in prison, according to the law. Even forgiven, this generation of God's people faced certain death in the desert.

It should be noticed, too, that this application of the consequences of sin will sometimes, and perhaps often, effect innocent people. God has announced that of this generation, only Joshua and Caleb will see Canaan. This does not prevent these two righteous men from having to wander with the offenders for 38 years. They, too, must suffer the consequences of Israel's disbelief, even though they were faithful to the Lord.

But the certainty of Israel's punishment does not seem to prevent them from sinning during their wilderness wanderings. We will note one example, that of Israel's sin with the Moabites, recorded in Numbers 25. The text says that Israel is negatively influenced by the women of Moab and that they begin sacrificing and bowing to Moabite gods, even to the point of participating in illicit sexual activities.

Again, God's wrath burns and a major punishment is announced. He tells Moses to impale all of the chiefs of Israel, *in order that the fierce anger of the LORD may turn away from Israel* (Num 25:4). As Moses is preparing the judges for this task, and as twenty-four thousand in Israel *who have yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor* have already died (Num 25:9), an Israelite man comes into the camp with a Midianite woman (the Midianites lived among the Moabites). The man takes the woman into his tent in front of all Israel. This is too much for Phinehas, grandson of Aaron, who takes up his spear, follows the two into the tent, and thrusts them both through, killing them without mercy.

**Even forgiven, this generation of God's
people faced certain death in the desert.**

Now, notice what God says to this, and see the *because/therefore* application:

*Phinehas (...) has turned back my wrath from the
Israelites by manifesting such zeal among them on*

my behalf that in my jealousy I did not consume the Israelites. Therefore say, I hereby grant him my covenant of peace. It shall be for him and for his descendants after him a covenant of perpetual priesthood, because he was zealous for his God, and made atonement for the Israelites.

Num 25:10-13

There is definitely a reciprocity working here. **Because** the people are unfaithful, **therefore** God plans their destruction. But **because** Phinehas steps in, **therefore** God not only spares Israel, but he accords special grace to Phinehas.

Near the end of Israel's wanderings, after the first generation of those who left Egypt has died, Moses begins to warn their children:

If you turn away from following him, he will again abandon [you] in the wilderness; and you will destroy all this people.

Num 32:15

If you do forget the LORD your God and follow other gods to serve and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish. Like the nations that the LORD is destroying before you, so shall you perish, because you would not obey the voice of the LORD your God.

Deut 8:19-20

See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse (Remember, both are retributions - CW): the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today; and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn (...) to follow other gods that you have not known.

Deut 11:26-27

These are more **if/then** warnings, because they are given before the fact. At the end of his Deuteronomy discourse, in chapters 28-30 Moses essentially describes the next few centuries of Israel's history, in the form of blessings and curses. He goes all the way to the captivity, describing Israel's life among the nations. And he says that even those nations will wonder:

Why has the LORD done thus to this land? What caused this great display of anger? They will conclude, it is because they abandoned the covenant of the LORD the God of their ancestors, which he made with the when he brought them out of the land of Egypt.

Deut 29:24-25

We must notice the **because/therefore** rule used here, given as a prophecy of what the Lord is going to do to a faithless nation, in application of the principle of reciprocity.

After promising to bring them back if they repent of their infidelity, Moses finishes with this appeal:

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Deut 30:19-20

And in his last song to the people, Moses predicts the vengeance of the Lord on a disobedient people (Deut 32:35) and upon the enemies of his people (Deut 32:36, 41, 43). He says, verse 43:

The LORD will avenge the blood of his people, and take vengeance on his adversaries.

As Israel approaches the plains of Jericho, God again warns them: **If you do not exterminate the peoples of this land and their idols, then**

those whom you let remain shall be as barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides; they shall trouble you in the land where you are settling. And I will do to you as I thought to do to them.

Num 33:55-56

RECIPROCITY - The Books of History

Unfortunately, the entry into Canaan did not at all signal the end to the rebellion of Israel. After the military conquest of the land, Joshua is obliged to repeat the same kinds of warnings that Moses had given a generation before. In his last address to the gathered people, recorded in Joshua 23 and 24, this old soldier calls upon Israel to establish its priorities and serve the Lord, as he and his house have decided to do. When the people declare that they will remain faithful to God, Joshua makes a surprising statement:

You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD, to serve him.

Josh 24:22

Why does he say this? Because he knows only too well that they will not keep their promise. Just a few verses before, he had said to them:

If you transgress the covenant of the LORD your God (...), then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you, and you shall perish.

Josh 24:16

There follows in the history of Israel a period of darkness and confusion during which, according to the last verse in Judges, *all the*

people did what was right in their own eyes, and during which the people fulfilled to the letter the prophecy-warnings that Moses and Joshua had given. Here is just one example of this:

The land had rest eighty years. (...) The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, after Ehud died. So the LORD sold them into the hand of King Jabin of Canaan (...). Then the Israelites cried out to the LORD for help (...).

Judg 3:9-4.3

This cycle was to be repeated over and over, not only during the judges period, but during the royal period to follow.

In the transition period between the judges and the kings, the high priest Eli is punished for the blasphemous behavior of his "scoundrel" sons, Hophni and Phinehas. God revokes his promise to guarantee Eli a place before him forever. The reason given is based on reciprocity:

Those who honor me I will honor, and those who despise me shall be treated with contempt.

1 Sam 2:30

When Israel decides they want a king, Samuel warns them of the consequences of having a king over them. But the people persist and Saul is appointed. Now, listen to Samuel's warning, which is an if/then declaration:

If you will fear the LORD and serve him and heed his voice and not rebel against the commandment of the LORD, and if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the LORD your God, [then] it will be well; but if you will not heed the voice of the LORD, but rebel against the commandment of the LORD, then the hand of the LORD will be against you and your king.

1 Sam 12:14-15

Only fear the LORD, and serve him faithfully with all your heart; for consider what great things he has done for you. But if you still do wickedly, [then] you shall be swept away, both you and your king.

1 Sam 12:24-25

When Saul decides to offer a burnt offering because he tires of waiting for Samuel, he is dethroned by God for not keeping his commandments (1 Sam 13:13-14). God tells him:

Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has also rejected you from being king.

1 Sam 15:23

Later, when Saul has Samuel raised from the dead by the medium at Endor, the man from the grave says to Saul:

Because you did not obey the voice of the LORD (...) therefore the LORD has done this thing to you this day.

1 Sam 28:18

Saul's rejection by God as king of Israel is based on reciprocity. Because Saul decides to follow his own will, to listen to his own foolish heart and to be guided by his own stubborn thinking, and not by God, God must reject him. God must render him a reciprocal retribution, applying to him the consequences of his actions.

There are some **because/therefore** considerations in the incident with David and Bathsheba, recorded in 2 Samuel 12. The prophet Nathan, confronting David with his sin, declares that as a result of what he has done - -

- - now, therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, for (because - CW) you have despised me.

2 Sam 12:10

Nathan further announces that, in spite of David's repentance, the child

engendered by his sin shall die. David must bear the consequences of his sin, even if he is forgiven of the sin itself.

In the instructions of God to Solomon, there are some **if/then** warnings which, especially in his later life, Solomon apparently did not heed:

If you will walk before me (...) with integrity and uprightness (...), then I will establish your royal throne over Israel forever.

If you turn aside from following me (...) and do not keep my commandments (...), then I will cut Israel off from the land that I have given them.

1 Kings 9: 4-7

God here states his intention to govern his actions by those of Solomon. What Solomon does will determine what God does. This is exactly the same reciprocal principle stated by Jesus in Matthew 10:32-33:

Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.

This declaration of Jesus should convince us that the principle under consideration is not merely an Old Testament phenomenon, and that the grace of God personified in Jesus Christ does not annul a reciprocal quality in his relationship with his children.

RECIPROCITY - The Prophets

Isaiah, Amos and Micah, prophesying at about the same time, all denounce the iniquity of Israel and the rebellion of its leaders against God. They predict the coming terror that God will bring upon his people because of their perversity. These are **because/therefore** passages,

illustrating reciprocity.

Because this people has refused the waters of Shiloah that flow gently (...), therefore the LORD is bringing up against it the mighty flood waters of the River, the king of Assyria and all his glory.

Isa 8:6-7

Samaria shall bear her guilt, because she has rebelled against her God.

Hos 13:16

Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob and chiefs of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert all equity (...), [who] say, "Surely the LORD is with us!", therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field.

Mic 3:9-12

Then when Israel is taken by the Assyrians, the reason is given, in 2 Kings 18:12: *because they did not obey the voice of the LORD their God but transgressed his covenant — all that Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded; they neither listened nor obeyed.*

Jeremiah, like Isaiah, has a lot to say about this principle of reciprocity. Jeremiah seems more caustic, harsher in his judgments. Of many examples, here are two (Jer 2:17; 4:18):

Have you not brought this upon yourself by forsaking the LORD your God, while he led you in the way?

Your ways and your doings have brought this upon you.

Jeremiah would disagree with the popular idea that one should never say "I told you so". He is trying to show the people that

they have no one to blame but themselves, that God is merely applying to them the results of their own choice.

God even indicates that the reciprocal principle can reach a point of no return, that is, a point where his grace is no longer an option (*the Lord was not willing to pardon*).

(2 Kings 24:4)

In an impassioned plea recorded in the 5th chapter of Jeremiah, God describes to Israel just how serious is their sin and how rigorous must be his reciprocal reaction to it. He represents Israel as having given him no choice but to do what he must do:

*How can I pardon you?
Your children have forsaken me,
and have sworn by those who are no gods.
When I fed them to the full,
they committed adultery
and trooped to the houses of prostitutes.
They were well-fed lusty stallions,
each neighing for his neighbor's wife.
Shall I not punish them for these things?
says the LORD?
and shall I not bring retribution
on a nation such as this?*

Jer 5:7-9

God even indicates that the reciprocal principle can reach a point of no return, that is, a point where his grace is no longer an option (*the Lord was not willing to pardon*, 2 Kings 24:4). He forbids Jeremiah to pray for the people (Jer 11:14-17) and addresses this declaration to them:

The house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken the covenant that I made with their ancestors. Therefore, says the LORD, assuredly I am going to bring disaster on them that they cannot escape; though they cry out to me, I will not listen to them.

Jer 11:10-11

Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, says the Lord in Jeremiah 15:1, yet my heart would not turn toward this people. Ezekiel says essentially the same thing, mentioning Noah, Job and Daniel (Ezek 14:12-23).

Let us pause at this juncture to make an important point. We have just looked at passages that indicate that there are limits to the grace of God, that rebellion and disobedience will be treated gently — up to a certain point. Then God says, "No more." Woe to the nation or the individual that pushes God to this extreme. When God refuses to pardon, only death and destruction can be ahead. This is what happened to the Jewish people; it is what will happen to every nation that refuses his sovereignty. In light of these considerations, here are some words of wisdom:

They say that God has infinite patience,
And that is a great comfort.

They say that God is always there,
And that is a deep satisfaction.
They say that God will always take you back,
And I get lazy in that certitude.

They say that God never gives up,
And I count on that.

They say you can go away for years and years,
And he'll be there, waiting, when you come back.

They say you can make mistake after mistake,
And God will always forgive and forget.

They say lots of things,

These people who never read the Old Testament.

There comes a time,
A definite, for sure time,
When God turns around.

I don't believe God shed his skin
When Christ brought in the New Testament;
Christ showed us a new side of God,
And it is truly wonderful.

But he didn't change God.
God remains forever and ever
And that God
is
no
fool.²

The prophet Ezekiel is especially virulent in his elaboration of the principle of reciprocity. He declares that God himself has become Israel's enemy (Ezek 5:7-9) and outlines his actions against them. We will put them in schematic form, for rapid reading:



BECAUSE ...

of all your abominations - 5:9

you have defiled my sanctuary - 5:11

of your iniquity - 7:13

you have uttered falsehoods and envisioned lies - 13:8

[you] have acted unfaithfully - 15:8

**you have forgotten me and cast me behind
your back - 23:35**

**of all [your] abominations that [you] have
committed - 33:29**

[you] dealt treacherously with me - 39:23

THEREFORE ...

I will have no pity - 5:11

I will bring down [your] deeds upon [your] heads - 9:10

I will make the land desolate - 15:8

I will judge you - 16:38

I have made you a disgrace before the nations - 22:4



When Judah is taken by the Babylonians, the reason is obvious: God is fulfilling his **because/therefore** promise.

*I will wipe Jerusalem as one wipes a dish (...)
because they have done what is evil in my sight
and have provoked me to anger, since the day
their ancestors came out of Egypt, even to this
day.*

2 Kings 21:13-15

RECIPROCITY - Post-Captivity

During the period of the Babylonian captivity, and especially during the returns to Jerusalem, some magnificent texts of godly men perfectly illustrate this principle of reciprocity. In Ezra 5:12, the Jews rebuilding the old temple gave this explanation of their exile:

Because our fathers had angered the God of heaven, he gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this house and carried away the people to Babylonia.

When Ezra sees that the returned exiles are intermarrying with the nations around, he prays and wonders, almost aloud: if God sent us into exile for our sins, what will he do now if we start again (Ez 9:13-15)? Nehemiah recalls the *if/then* words of God in Nehemiah 1.8, and scolds the officials in 13:18 by saying: *Did not your ancestors act in this way, and did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city?* And the wise Daniel remembers this principle in his prayer, when he says in Daniel 9:11: *The curse and the oath written in the law of Moses, the servant of God, have been poured out upon us, because we have sinned against you.*

All of the players in the reconstruction of the temple and of the battered city of God recognize that the factor that has brought them to this point is a principle of reciprocity. God has applied to his people the results of their own choice, by laying on them the curse which he promised to those who refused his sovereignty.

RECIPROCITY - Psalms and Proverbs

The Psalms and Proverbs illustrate well the principle of reciprocity, with its emphasis of blessing on the righteous and destruction on the evil. Here are just a few examples from those two collections:

PSALMS

The boastful will stand before your eyes; you hate all evildoers. You destroy those who speak lies; the LORD abhors the blood-thirsty and evil men. 5:5-6

For you bless the righteous, O LORD; you cover them with favor as with a shield. 5:12

The LORD preserves the faithful, but abundantly repays
the one who acts haughtily. 31:23

You put an end to those who are false to you. 73:27

*The LORD watches over all who love him, but all the
wicked he will destroy.* 147:20

PROVERBS

*The upright will abide in the land, and the innocent will
remain in it; but the wicked will be cut off from the land,
and the treacherous will be rooted out of it.* 2:21-22

*The righteousness of the blameless keeps their ways
straight, but the wicked fall by their own wickedness.* 11:5

*Be assured, the wicked will not go unpunished, but those
who are righteous will escape.* 11:21

*The house of the wicked is destroyed, but the tent of the
upright flourishes.* 14:11

*The reward for humility and fear of the LORD is riches
and honor and life.* 22:4

It seems so clear: peace and prosperity for those who please God; destruction and misery for those who reject him. But are things really so simple? If this were an altogether automatic cause-effect phenomenon, only Christians would be prosperous, and all evil-doers would be miserable. Instead, we know from observation, from simple reasoning, and from the biblical teaching that this is not the case. Psalm 73 of Asaph illustrates the truth that evil men can and do prosper, while the righteous can suffer at their hands. Where is the principle of retributational reciprocity in these cases?

RECIPROCITY - Job

With this question in mind, we must look at the case of Job. The clear message of Job is that a virtuous man can suffer serious, even punishing trials that he does not deserve, or at least that are not a direct result of sin. Eliphaz, one of Job's "friends," tells Job that the suffering of an evil man is necessarily because he has stretched forth his hand against God, and *bid defiance to the Almighty* (15:25). It is the only way Eliphaz can explain this suffering, and indeed it does seem to fit the kind of teaching we have seen to this point.

But Job rejects any personal responsibility for his suffering, while maintaining at the same time that the wicked are not necessarily always persecuted. God bears him witness (though Job is unaware of this) that he is a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil. And every Bible student knows that Job is vindicated in the end.

The story of Job teaches us that the principle of reciprocity is not responsible for all suffering, or that, put another way, not all suffering can be traced back to evil. Job's is a suffering outside of retribution, outside of *if/then* and *because/therefore* considerations.

The story of Job teaches us that the principle of reciprocity is not responsible for all suffering.

This can be explained by the fact that while the Scriptures do maintain that evil actions bring on evil, and that good actions bring on good, they nowhere state that everything that occurs in a man's life is a direct result of something he has done. When and under what circumstances our actions will be requited is up to the Creator, who is certainly master of his timetable. In the meantime, events can and do occur that have no apparent connection to anything we have done. Bad events are often only the result of the established fact of human frailty and of our participation in a fallen world where sin and death - and their consequences - are abundant, and where the innocent suffer along with the guilty. Good events can often be

attributed to simple circumstance, regardless of moral considerations. An all-powerful God can intervene in these occurrences at any time, to prevent the evil or to bring on the good, but he does not always choose to do so, for reasons known only to himself.

In Job's case, a righteous man is put on the block for suffering that he has not deserved. We know why this occurs, but the principal victim does not. This type of undeserved suffering, and its counterpart — undeserved blessing — are still part of the human experience. Retribution does not explain everything.

RECIPROCITY - The Gospels

As we have noted previously, the principle of reciprocity, so prevalent in the Old Testament, also has a definite place in the teaching of the Son of God. Consider these statements of Jesus:

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath. Jn 3:36

Those who have done good (will come out) to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.

Jn 5:29

The measure you give will be the measure you get. Mt 7:2

Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I will deny before my Father in heaven.

Mt 10:32

The Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay (quite-CW) everyone for what he has done.

Mt 16:27

These declarations are clear references to a law that God himself has established, and according to which a man's actions during his life on the earth will have a direct effect upon God's behavior toward him in the life to come. This law is reciprocity.

In Matthew 23, Jesus pronounces a series of curses upon the hypocritical Pharisees. In a Jeremiah-like pronouncement, he challenges them: *You snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape being sentenced to hell* (vs. 33)? Jesus announces to the Pharisees that their sin is about to culminate in the slaying of the Messiah (vs. 30-32), and that for this sin, they will bear the weight of the guilt of - -

all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Truly I tell you, all this will come upon this generation.

Mt 23:35-36; cf. Lk 11:51

This must mean that the grievous nature of their sin consists not only in sanctioning the killing of all of the innocent servants of God over the generations, but also in adding dramatically to this guilt by going the final and fatal step, that of killing the Messiah himself, God's last and most important messenger. Reciprocity requires that this culminated and aggravated guilt be laid directly upon the generation that executes God's Messiah. This is precisely the threat that Jesus is leveling at the Jews.

But how will this threat be carried out? In Matthew 27:25, an exasperated Pontius Pilate declares to the crowd, *I am innocent of this man's blood*. The maddened crowd yells back, *His blood be on us and on our children!* Though they do not realize it, this is indeed what is about to occur. In this context, it is interesting to note that when the apostles begin to preach the Gospel and to draw the attention of the Sanhedrin, one of the charges made by that august body is that

- - you are determined to bring this man's blood on us.

Ac 5.28

And they were right.

In John 19:15, when Pilate asks, *Shall I crucify your king?* and the people respond, *We have no king but the emperor,* they effectively confirm the judgment of Jesus and seal the fate of Judaism. McGarvey-Pendleton, commenting on this verse, have this to say:

When the ancestors rejected Jehovah as their king (1 Sam 12:12), their faithful prophet, Samuel, worried then what the king of their choice would do, and what they would suffer under him. Thus Jesus also foretold what this Caesar of their choice would do to them (Lk 19:41-44; 23:27-31). They committed themselves to the tender mercies of Rome, and one generation later Rome trod them in the wine-press of her wrath.³

The destruction of Jerusalem and its sanctuary in 70 A.D., and with them the special relationship between God and the Jewish people, is the reciprocal result of their cold-blooded execution of their Messiah, an act which in turn typifies and crystallizes the cumulated wickedness of centuries of rebellion. In his description of these events in Luke 21, Jesus declares that these were to be *days of vengeance, as a fulfillment of all that is written* (Lk 21:22).

Jesus knows exactly what is going to happen. And this is why he exhorts the women not to weep for him but for themselves (Lk 23:28-31): *If they do this when the wood is green, he says, what will they do when it is dry?* By the very fact of executing their Messiah, the Jewish people were declaring themselves to be the dry wood of which Jesus spoke, and which was soon to be consumed by fire.

RECIPROCITY - Epistles and Revelation

The principle of reciprocity is further developed in the epistles, especially in the writings of Paul concerning the coming judgment. He speaks of it as *a day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed* (Rom 2:5), when

he will repay according to each one's deeds: to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; while for those who

are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil (...) but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good.

Rom 2:6-10

Doesn't this sound like reciprocity? The relation is firmly established between what one does and what one receives. God will see to it. Paul is repeating here the teaching of Jesus, and that is to be expected, since it is from the risen Christ that he has received his revelation (1 Cor 9:1; Gal 1:11-12).

To the Thessalonians, Paul announces *the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ* (2 Thess. 2:1) in terms of *the righteous judgment of God* (2 Th 1:5), of which the announced goal will be

to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to the afflicted.

2 Th 1:6

This teaching is dramatically punctuated by some of the strongest wording of the New Testament on the subject of vengeance and retribution. Try to read without emotion the following lines:

The Lord Jesus [will be] revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes to be glorified by his saints and to be marveled at on that day among all who have believed.

2 Th 1:7-10

The Christian should thrill at this promise that he shall be permitted to observe the glory of the Lord and to marvel at his presence. And the non-believer should seriously consider the extreme severity that is demonstrated concerning him. The Christian message is not only one of joy and blessing for those who recognize the sovereignty of the Lord; it is also one of terrible condemnation for those who refuse to recognize the Savior who died for them.

To the Christians at Rome, Paul announces a rule that is governed by reciprocity:

If you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

Rom 8:13

The same principle in other terms is given to the Galatians:

Do not be deceived, God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow.

Gal 6:7

We must not neglect another important **because/therefore** passage of the epistles, one that is positive in its nature. This passage is a favorite among Christians, though most have a long way to go toward applying it correctly. This text is found in Philippians 2 where, beginning with verse 5, Paul exhorts Christians to be motivated by the same mind set that was in Jesus, who accepted to renounce the privileges of his deity, to empty himself, to be a slave, and in humility to be obedient even unto death. Now, notice the reciprocal result of this kind of self-effacement:

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Phil 2:9-11

This agrees with prophecies such as that of Isaiah 53:12 (*Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great (...) because he poured out himself to death*) and with Jesus' promise to his followers in Luke 14:11 (*All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted*). And it all has to do with reciprocity.

We'll look at several other New Testament references to this principle in list form:

Those who endure temptation will receive the crown of life.

Jas 1:12

Those who show no mercy will be judged without mercy.

Jas 2:13

Those who make peace will receive a harvest of righteousness.

Jas 3:18

Those who ask wrongly will not receive.

Jas 4:2-4

Those who resist the devil will make him flee.

Jas 4:7-8

Those who draw near to God will see him draw near to them.

Jas 4:8

God's eyes and ears are open to the righteous, but his face is against the evil ones.

1 Pet 3:12

God opposes the proud; God gives grace to the humble.

1 Pet 5:5

Those who twist the Scriptures do so to their own destruction.

2 Pet 3:16

Those who confess their sins have their sins forgiven.

1 Jn 1:9

Those who obey God receive what they ask according to his will.

1 Jn 3:22

*Those who pervert the grace of God into licentiousness
are designated for condemnation.*

Jude 4

Those who conquer will be - -

given authority and the morning star,

Rev 2:26-28

clothed with white robes, Rev 3:3-5

given a place on the throne of God.

Rev 3:21

To worship the beast is to incur the wrath of God.

Rev 14:9-11

*To add to the prophecy of God's word is to suffer
its plagues.*

Rev 22:18

*To subtract from the prophecy of God's word is to lose
one's share in the tree of life and the holy city.*

Rev 22:19

God will repay each one according to his works.

Rev 22:12

There is certainly no escaping such an evident law as that of reciprocity. We must be careful to discern its importance to the plan of God for mankind, and to see how it applies specifically to our own response to his grace.

4

WRATH AND MERCY

To this point in our study, we have observed vengeance and retribution in an essentially functional relationship between actions and their reward. We must understand, however, that the principal force at work is not an impersonal, unaltered, mechanical law of retribution, but a living, personal God who is in charge of the universe and who sees to it that justice is done.

We must also understand that the wrath of this all-powerful God, directed at evil wherever it is found, is in itself an expression of mercy toward his faithful ones, and indeed to the entire world. If that last sentence doesn't quite make sense, read it again, then let us examine what is meant by it, in this chapter.

Vengeance and retribution, as mentioned in the preface of this book, are tied unequivocally to the major theme of the Bible, that of the coming of God into human history to offer salvation to mankind through a divine sacrifice. That being the case, vengeance and retribution are necessarily linked to the grace and love of God, to his atonement for our sin at Calvary, to the forgiveness and reconciliation he offers us based on the expiation of our sins.

Consider the words of J. I. Packer on this point:

If we would know God, it is vital that we face the truth concerning His wrath, however unfashionable it may be, and however strong our initial prejudice against it. Otherwise, we shall not understand the gospel of salvation from wrath, nor the propitiatory achievement of the cross, nor the wonder of the redeeming love of God. Nor shall we understand the hand of God in history, and God's

present dealing with our own people; nor shall we be able to make heads or tails of the book of Revelation; nor will our evangelism have the urgency enjoined by Jude — 'save some, by snatching them out of the fire' (Jude 23). Neither our knowledge of God nor our service to Him, will be in accord with His Word.¹

John R. W. Stott, quoting P. T. Forsyth, is even more succinct:

If we spoke less about God's love and more about his holiness, more about his judgment, we should say much more when we did speak of his love.²

The biblical teaching is clear: it is not possible to separate God's holiness and his judgment from his eternal love. But, far from showing us an alternating kind of expression of these two qualities (love in one circumstance, wrath in another), the biblical text often shows them together, operating at the same time, each dependent on the other, intertwined and powerfully effective.

WRATH AND MERCY - Egypt

Perhaps the first sign that the wrath of God is also a sign of his mercy for his people is when he delivers Israel from slavery in an idolatrous land. Egypt is shaken by a series of terrible plagues, of which the last and most terrible is the death of all the firstborn in the country. During this final plague, before God sends the dreaded destroyer over Egypt, he indicates to his people how their firstborn may be saved from certain death: the blood of a sacrificial lamb, spread over the doors and on the doorposts, will protect them. This is the origin of the feast of the Passover, so named because *he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, when he struck down the Egyptians but spared our houses* (Ex 12:27). The Passover is a type, a prefiguration, of Jesus' sacrifice. You will note that it could not be accomplished without the blood of an innocent victim, and

that the blood of that innocent victim was all that stood between Israel and death.

If we spoke less about God's love and more about his holiness, more about his judgment, we should say much more when we did speak of his love. - Forsyth

WRATH AND MERCY -

The Feast of the Atonement

Another example of God's wrath/mercy is the ceremony of Atonement, or the Feast of Expiation, celebrated annually and described in Leviticus 16 and 23. Every Bible student learns from these texts the intricate process by which the annual atonement was made, and which included the offering of the blood of several innocent victims. The High Priest was obliged to sacrifice an animal for his own sins and for those of his household before doing the same for the rest of the people of Israel. The blood of the sacrificed animals had to be sprinkled on the ark of the covenant in the Most Holy Place and on the Tent of Meeting and its altar. Finally, the High Priest laid both hands on the head of a live goat and confessed all of Israel's sins. This "scapegoat" (NIV), bearing the burden of Israel's guilt, was then led to a deserted place and abandoned. After this ceremony, according to Leviticus 16:30, Israel was *clean before the Lord* of all their sins.

This is indeed an interesting statement. It indicates that the forgiveness of sins was available to Israel before Christ, as it is available to Christians after Christ. By what means was this forgiveness obtained, before Christ? Did the ceremony which we have just seen in fact erase Israel's sin? No, according to Hebrews 10:4, which clearly states that

it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

How, then, can it be said that Israel was clean of all their sins after the ceremony of atonement? Hebrews 9:15 explains it:

He is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, because a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant.

In other words, the blood of Christ had a retroactive effect, purifying the sins committed before he came. The forgiveness of sins offered to Israel on the Day of Atonement and the forgiveness offered to obedient believers today have the same unique source: the shed blood of Jesus of Nazareth.

The day of Atonement was characterized by the shedding of the blood of an innocent victim. Indeed, in God's plan all forgiveness of sin is accompanied by blood. According to Hebrews 9:22, *without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins*. This is simply another way of saying that the wrath of God is also the source of his mercy.

WRATH AND MERCY - Achan's punishment

During the sacking of the city of Jericho, the instructions given to the troops had been formal:

Keep away from the things devoted to destruction, so as not to (...) make the camp of Israel an object for destruction, bringing trouble upon it. But all silver and gold, and vessels of bronze and iron, are sacred to the Lord; they shall go into the treasury of the Lord.

Josh 6:18-19

An Israelite by the name of Achan steals a mantle and some gold and silver, burying it in the ground underneath his tent. The text tells us that when Achan did this, *the anger of the LORD burned against the Israelites* (Josh 7:1), all of the Israelites. One family had sinned, and all Israel was counted as guilty. There is really no reason to question the justice of this, for God is just. Indeed, in the light of his holiness, a stain in Israel was truly a stain on all Israel.

When Achan's crime is discovered, he and his family are stoned and burned. *Then*, say the Scriptures, *the LORD turned from his burning anger* (Josh 7:25). All of Israel had been tainted by one family's sin. When God's wrath destroyed that one family, he wiped out the stain on all Israel. Certainly, God would prefer that people be righteous without having to be punished. But when punishment is necessary, it is used to make people see the need to turn from their sins and be saved. As such, the wrath of God becomes the instrument of his mercy.

The prophet Isaiah illustrates this point. Isaiah 1:22ff. draws up a list of the iniquities of Israel. Among these are rebellion, thievery, corruption, neglect of widows and orphans. *Therefore*, God says in verse 24, *I will pour out my wrath on my enemies, and avenge myself of my foes!* (The foes, in this case, are his own people!) *Afterward*, he says in verse 26, *you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city.* God's wrath produces chastisement, which in turn produces righteousness, and Israel is then safe before him. This, then, is God's merciful goal for a sinful people, when he punishes their iniquity.

Isaiah then applies this principle to all men in 26:9-10:

When your judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness. If favor is shown to the wicked, they do not learn righteousness (. . .) they do not see the majesty of the Lord.

The judgments of the Lord in all the earth are for the purpose of helping people learn to live properly before him. When they learn righteousness through his judgments, he is no longer obliged to chastise them.

An over-indulgence of evil and of evil people in any society has just the opposite effect. It permits the spread of wickedness, which in turn calls for the vengeance of God. All modern society needs to heed this truth. A nation whose laws indulge the wicked and the criminal will necessarily suffer the vengeance of a righteous God, sooner or later. And when this occurs, that nation will be the better for it. So it is the mercy of God that judges and punishes evil in man.

When the people of God suffer at the hands of wicked elements in a society, God cannot remain passively on the sidelines. We've seen already

that the biblical text shows God vindicating his people by punishing their enemies. This is called *vengeance for his temple* in Jeremiah 51:11. Indeed, after God has used the ruthless Assyrians and the merciless Babylonians to punish his rebellious people, he then turns his wrath against these same nations because of their arrogance and their evil.

The prophecy of Habakuk especially makes this point. Habakuk learns that while God is willing to punish his people by means of nations more wicked than they, those nations will not escape their own punishment. God will always vindicate his people.

Micah also illustrates this teaching when he says:

*I must bear the indignation of the Lord,
Because I have sinned against him,
Until he takes my side
And executes judgment for me.* Mic 7:9

WRATH AND MERCY - The Messiah

It is Isaiah who seems, first, to link the idea of the coming Messiah with a drastic vengeance of the Lord upon his enemies. He places the *branch of the LORD* (4:2) on a parallel with the *spirit of judgment* and the *spirit of burning* that will cleanse the bloodstains of Jerusalem (4:4). He declares to Israel that

*Because you have said,
"We have made a covenant with death
(...)",
Therefore, thus says the Lord God,
See, I am laying in Zion a foundation stone,
A tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure
foundation: 'One who trusts will not panic.'"*
Isa 28:15-16

Three teachings are evident in this passage. First, it is clearly messianic; second, it identifies the context of the Messiah's work as one of retribution for evil; but, third, it also declares that the Messiah's work

will express God's mercy to his people, who will be able to have confidence once more. This passage is quoted several times in the Bible in reference to the saving work of Jesus-Christ:

Whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.

Rom 9:33, cf. 10:11; 1 Pet 2:6

There follows in Isaiah 28 a series of menacing prophecies concerning judgment:

Hail will sweep away the refuge of lies (17)

Waters will overwhelm the shelter (17)

The overwhelming scourge will pass through (18)

There will be sheer terror (19)

There will be a decree of destruction (22)

Compare this with Isaiah 35:3 ff., where the prediction that we know so well, of the eyes of the blind being opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped, etc., is accompanied by the words:

*Here is your God,
He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you.*

Notice the statement here that the Lord will save with vengeance and recompense. Now, picture Jesus standing up in the synagogue of his village of Nazareth (Lk 4:16ff.), taking the scroll and reading from Isaiah 61:1ff:

*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
He has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor.*

This is where Luke stops quoting. But the passage goes on to say, and Jesus surely also read what follows:

*and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn.*

The year of the Lord's favor, according to Isaiah, is also *the day of vengeance of our God*. And the juncture of the two has as its result the comforting of all who mourn. We must not miss the high significance of what Isaiah is saying, and what Jesus is confirming about his mission. It was to be a terrible vengeance upon the evil of men, and at the same time a source of boundless relief for their souls.

The prophet Micah also uses this double-pointed view of the messianic mission. In Micah 5, a highly messianic prophecy, beginning with the prediction of the birth of the Messiah at Bethlehem (5:2), God declares that in that messianic day, he will *execute vengeance on the nations that did not obey* (5:15).

Throughout the prophetic literature of the Old Testament, we run into expressions like *the cup of wrath*, or *the cup of staggering*, or *the bowl of wrath*. One of the most graphic examples of this is in Jeremiah 25, where God requires that not only Jerusalem, but all nations drink of this cup. But let us notice the context in which he places this "drinking": he says, in verses 28-29:

You must drink! See, I am beginning to bring disaster on the city that is called by my name, and how can you possibly avoid punishment? You shall not go unpunished for I am summoning a sword against all the inhabitant of the earth, says the Lord of hosts.

Jeremiah seems to be saying that God's plan includes punishing all of the nations with a punishment portrayed as the drinking of the cup of his anger. Placing the sword — symbol of authority and judgment — on a level with the action of drinking the cup — symbol of suffering God's wrath — helps us to understand that the coming work of God was definitely to include an action that would constitute a real punishment of the iniquity of the world.

In Gethsemane, when Jesus prayed with anguish not to have to drink this cup, he was truly dreading his direct encounter with the vengeance of God; but he had to drink it, he had to drink all of it. The cup of the wrath of God then became *the cup of blessing* (1 Cor 10:14), *the new covenant in my blood* (Lk 22:20), *which is poured out for many* (Mk 14:24), *unto the remission of sins* (Mt 26:28).

What does all of this say to us? It says that **God's redemptive work in Jesus Christ is his vengeance upon the evil of mankind**. His wrath directed at the wickedness of all men everywhere translates into his grace offered to all. Isaiah explains how this can be, in words that could only come from the heart of God:

*He was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.
(...) He poured out himself to death,
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sins of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors.*

Isa 53: 5-6,12

This truth is borne out in the matchless passage of Hebrews 10:19ff., which tells us that Christ has opened *a new and living way into the presence of God through the curtain* (that is, *through his flesh*).

**God's redemptive work in Jesus Christ
is his vengeance upon the evil of
mankind.**

What does this mean? It is in fact a remarkably clear reference to the veil of the temple, hung between the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies.

This veil concealed the presence of God, into which only the high priest could enter, and that only once per year, carrying with him a blood sacrifice for his own sins and also for the sins of the people. The veil was therefore obviously meant to prefigure the body of Christ, torn to open the way to full access to the presence of God. It is no accident, then, that at the moment his suffering flesh yielded up its magnificent spirit, the literal veil of the literal temple in Jerusalem was torn in two, from top to bottom (Mt 27:51), that is, from God to man.

Now, it becomes clear what God was doing. God's vengeance upon the iniquity of mankind was a final, terrible, once-for-all, unheard-of divine vengeance. In Christ, every sin was requited, God's holy vengeance was completely satisfied. The punishment fit each crime, every sin received its just recompense. Only one element was changed: God's love refused to allow him to unleash this terrible retribution directly upon mankind. So he did it to himself. **To avenge the iniquity of mankind, God tore his own flesh, he shed his own blood. GOD EXERCISED GOD'S VENGEANCE ON GOD!** Thus were reconciled in the same timeless, unrepeatable, previously unimaginable act, his absolute justice and his perfect love.

Thereafter, and in view of this unique gift of God to all men, every reference to the condemnation of sin and to the justification of the righteous can only be understood in the framework of the blood of the son of God.

Paul, especially, demonstrates this:

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood.

Rom 3:22-26

One has died for all, therefore all have died. (Read: one has paid the price of sin for all, thus is it just as if all had received retribution for their sin.) And he died for all, so that those who

live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

2 Cor 5:14-15

God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things (...) through the blood of his cross.

Col 1:20

He has now reconciled (us) in his fleshly body through death.

Col 1:22

God forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us (...) nailing it to the cross.

Col 2:13-14

The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews pictures Jesus entering the tabernacle in the heavens, bearing his own blood (Heb 9:12), having offered his body for our sanctification (10:10), as an offering to the vengeance of God against the sin of all mankind.

John underlines this important truth:

Jesus Christ the righteous (...) is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

1 Jn 2:1-2

"*The atoning sacrifice*". Some versions say the *expiation* or the *propitiation*. Both of these terms denote the satisfying of a legitimate requirement, while the first term, *expiation*, involves a substitution. Jesus was, in fact, substituting himself for us, taking the retribution which was due to us, exactly as Isaiah had announced centuries before.

But we must look at one more key text before finishing this chapter. The text is found in Hebrews 12:24-25, where the author is describing Mount Zion, the city of God, and all the benefits of the covenant related to it. At the end of the list of advantages of the second covenant, he says

we have come to -

*Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant,
and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a
better word than the blood of Abel.*

Heb 12:24

What does he mean by this last statement? In Hebrews 11:4, the author had mentioned Abel, saying simply that he offered a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's, that he received approval from God as righteous, and that his faith still speaks. But it is probably not to this verse that the author is referring in Hebrews 12:24; instead, he is speaking of the original account of Abel's death, in which the Lord says to Cain: *Your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground* (Gen 4:10).

And what was the blood of Abel crying out for? Vengeance! Retribution! If we put Genesis 4:10 next to Jesus' declaration that all of the righteous blood shed on earth - from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah - would come upon the generation that killed the Messiah (Mt 23:35; Lk 11:51), we can understand: As Abel's blood called for vengeance, so did the blood of all the righteous from his time until the time of Jesus. When the Jewish nation crucified its Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, who bore upon his shoulders the horrible sins of the centuries, God was in fact avenging his holy name, taking vengeance for Abel and all the others, at last vindicating the righteous and declaring an end to his wrath, for all who would come to him.

Jesus is thus not only the last Adam (Rom 5:15-19; 1 Cor 15:22,45), but also, and just as significantly, the last Abel. The first Adam's sin led to condemnation for all men, Paul says, and the last Adam's act of righteous leads to justification and life for all (Rom 5:18). In much the same way, the blood of the first Abel called for vengeance upon a wicked world, while the blood of the last Abel calls for forgiveness, because it is itself the blood of the vengeance of God upon all evil.

(God) heard the sound of the drops of blood on the ground and said, *"the voice of Abel's blood cried to me from the ground"*. That cry was for justice, for perfect

equity and righteousness—a cry that was perfectly lawful. But when Jesus shed his blood, it uttered a voice far beyond the blood of Abel.

The blood of Jesus has a voice. The eternal Father heard every drop of blood that gushed from the body of His dear Son, heard the sound as they fell on the earth. (...) Every drop of that precious blood cried with infinite pathos for mercy and compassion: "Father, forgive them". "Father, sanctify them". This was the voice beyond martyrdom. It was atonement; it was the sacrifice of love, and hence it speaks better things than the blood of Abel.³

And Jesus' blood has a voice today. For 20 centuries it has called on God to forgive men, while calling on those same men to come to the God who has suffered in their place. The voice of the blood of Abel has been drowned out by that stronger, sweeter, firmer voice of the blood of the Son of God. And all who have heard that unforgettable voice can never be the same again.

5

HEAVEN AND HELL

We have seen that throughout the history of God's dealings with his people, he has caused definite patterns of retribution to be applied. We also noted that the final retribution, that of exacting a terrible vengeance upon the whole of mankind for the conglomerate sin of all, was assumed by God himself, in the person and in the sufferings of Jesus of Nazareth.

Several obvious questions remain to be asked: What does this mean in the "eternal" context? Has God's sacrifice made hell unnecessary? Does hell even exist? How could such a place be of any utility to a loving God who has given himself for all and who desires that everyone should come to salvation (1 Tim 2:4; 2 Pet 3:9)?

But we must back up and look, first of all, at what the Scriptures say about resurrection and the existence of a life after death. Here, there is certainly no lack of biblical teaching to guide us. In one of the most beautiful passages of the Old Testament, a weary and suffering Job declares his faith in a future life:

I know that my redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then, in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.

Job 19:25-26

Through the prophets, especially David in his messianic statements, God promises a resurrection:

Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure.

*For you do not give me up to Sheol,
or let your faithful one see the Pit.*

Ps 16:9 (Ac 2:25-31)

Jesus, aside from teaching his own resurrection (*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up*, Jn 2:18, see Mt 16:21, etc.), clearly taught that a resurrection will someday occur for all men. Four times in John chapter 6, he uses the expression, *I will raise them up on the last day* or some variation of it (vs. 39, 40, 44, 54). To the Sadducees who challenge him on his teaching of an afterlife, he declares that

the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Now he is not the God of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.

Lk 20:37-38

While he does not explain the mechanics of how men who have been dead for centuries can be alive with God as he speaks, Jesus is quite emphatic about the point he wants to make here: these men are alive because the dead are raised.

Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out.

Jn 5:29

This is clear enough. And Jesus' apostles were also quite clear:

If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. (...) But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead.

1 Cor 15:13, 20

That resurrection concerns not only Christians but everyone who has lived on the earth is evident from passages such as these:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him.
Mt 25:31-32

I have a hope in God (...) that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the unrighteous.
Ac 24:15

The sea gave up the dead which were in it; Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them.
Rev 20:13

Scripture plainly teaches a resurrection of all men. In view of what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:12-19 (see also Rom 10:9), it is even possible to say that one cannot be a Christian without believing that 1) Christ has been raised and 2) Christ's resurrection is a guarantee of our own.

What is more difficult to ascertain is what will follow this resurrection. Our concern in this study is to discern how what follows resurrection can fit into the biblical teaching concerning vengeance and retribution. And the Son of God leaves no doubt as to the answer to this interrogation. In the passage quoted earlier, John 5:29, we saw Jesus saying that *all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out*. But the rest of the verse was not quoted. The whole verse reads:

Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out – those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.

Christ is here announcing a link between physical death and God's applied retribution toward every human being; in other words, the resurrection can be considered the first step (or the last, however one looks at it!) toward definitive "merited requital".

This is confirmed by the passage quoted from Matthew 25 which, after

stating that *the nations will be gathered before him*, announces that *he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats*. Then follows a judgment after which *these* (on his left) *will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life* (Mt 25:32, 46). *The sea gave up the dead which were in it; Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them*, says John in Revelation 20:13, quoted above; then, he says, *all were judged according to what they had done*.

Now, we like to look at the everlasting blessings that Jesus promised to those who place their faith in him. They will have *eternal life*, says Jesus to Nicodemus (Jn 3:16); after the judgment, they will go into this eternal life (Mt 25:46). It is a place of *many dwelling places*, which Jesus has gone to prepare (John 14:1-3). Jesus' apostles, having been taught by him and guided *into all the truth* by his Spirit (Jn 16:13), also taught of heaven as a real place. Paul declares that the Christian's true citizenship is *in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ* (Phil 3:20); Peter assures Christians that their inheritance is *kept in heaven*, and that it is *imperishable, undefiled, and unfading* (1 Pet 1:4).

The resurrection can be considered the first step (or the last, however one looks at it!) toward definitive "merited requital".

If we accept these teachings as true, how can we then reject the parallel teaching by the same Lord and the same trained apostles concerning eternal punishment, or hell? It just won't do to say that a loving God would not send anyone to a place of punishment. This misses the point altogether. This loving God is also just and righteous. He will not permit his holiness to be taken lightly, or his sacrifice in Jesus to be trampled underfoot. He must and will apply the principles of retribution that we have been observing.

This is not to say that God enjoys punishing; exactly the opposite is true:

Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord GOD, and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live? (...) I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord GOD. Turn, then, and live.

Ezek 18:23, 32

The Lord (...) is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.

2 Pet 3:9

The lake of fire (Rev 20:15), that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death, and into which will be thrown the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars (Rev 21:7-8), was prepared, says Jesus, not for mankind, but for the devil and his angels (Mt 25:41). And the devil and his angels will indeed be condemned to this awful place (Rev 20:10). Even now, according to Jude (verse 6), the angels that *did not keep their own position but left their proper dwelling* are kept in eternal chains in deepest darkness, awaiting the judgment of the great day, when they will receive their retribution being cast with the devil into the lake of fire, there to be *tormented day and night forever and ever* (Rev 20:10).

Jesus himself is the teacher who most emphasizes the existence and the terrible nature of the place called hell. The hypocrisy of the Pharisees so incenses him that he indignantly interrogates them: *You snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape being sentenced to hell?* (Mt 23:33). The word translated *hell* here is the Greek word *gehenna*, referring to the valley of Hinnom and, doubtless, to the garbage dump of Jerusalem. But this is not a deterrent to a belief that Jesus is teaching a literal hell.

To know that **gehenna** was a garbage dump enlightens us as to why Jesus described it as a place where the worm never dies and the fire never goes out. Carcasses of dead animals, along with every other kind of refuse, were thrown on the garbage dump and burned. The perpetual burning, the acrid smoke, the stench of decaying flesh, the carcasses crawling with maggots combine to form as repulsive a picture as one can imagine. What must hell be

like if Jesus chose to use such a description in attempting to convey its horrors to us?¹

In an attempt to convince men that hell is a place they will not enjoy being, Jesus says that it will be a *furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth* (Mt 13:50), that this fire is *unquenchable* and those who suffer under it *never die* (Mk 9:44, 48); that it is a place of *outer darkness* (Mt 22:13) that should be avoided even at great price to oneself (Mk 9:42-48). Yet, in spite of these warnings, Jesus says that *many will take the road that leads to destruction* (Mt 7:13).

Listen, now, to Paul, as he describes this place. Notice also the reason he gives that put a man in this place. We go to the second letter to the Thessalonians, which we saw in chapter three, and where the Scripture says:

The Lord Jesus [will be] revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.

2 Th 1:7-9

This parallels Paul to the Romans:

By your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. For he will repay according to each one's deeds: to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil (...), but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good (...). For God shows no impartiality. Rom 2:5-11

From these teachings we can deduce the following:

- 1) Hell is a horrible place, prepared originally for angelic rebels.
- 2) It is a place of destruction, yet the sufferer does not die.
- 3) It is a place of absolute separation from the presence and the glory of God.
- 4) There is bitter remorse and agony there.
- 5) Though God does not want to send anyone to hell, he will indeed do so.
- 6) Those who go there will be the self-seeking, the wicked, those who refuse to obey Jesus and his Good News (Gospel).
- 7) The punishment of hell will be eternal, that is, as unending as the joys of heaven.

These facts reflect the biblical teaching of retribution. God, who desires to punish no one, will indeed do so if that punishment is what is deserved. And those who will deserve that punishment are those who have refused to come to Jesus, the Son of God, in order to obtain the forgiveness of their sins.

Heaven and hell are both retributory events. Revelation 20:12-15 demonstrates this in graphic symbols:

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books. And the sea gave up the dead that were in it. Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire; and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.

It is not a very pretty picture, and some would lift this clear teaching from the Bible. But an objective reader of the Scriptures must admit that as disagreeable as it is, it is a true doctrine, taught by the Lord himself, and therefore we must accept it.

A respected 19th century French biblical scholar had this to say about the Bible doctrine of hell:

I have done all I could not to find eternal punishment in the Word of God, but I have not succeeded (...). When I heard Jesus Christ say to me that the 'wicked will go into eternal punishment and the righteous into life eternal', and that thus the sufferings of the first will be just as eternal as the blessings of the second (...), I gave in, I bowed my head, I placed my hand on my mouth, I believed in eternal punishment.²

There remains one more point to make. We have seen that God in Jesus carried the sin of the world and suffered the punishment for these sins. The following passages illustrate this:

The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Isa 53:6

Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!

Jn 1:29

Jesus (...) was made lower than the angels (...) so that by the grace of God he might taste death for every man.

Heb 2:9

He is the atoning sacrifice for (...) the sins of the whole world.

1 Jn 2:2

Now, if on the one hand Jesus has already paid the price for the sins of the world, a fact which these passages and others plainly establish, and if on the other hand God will cast into the lake of fire those who refuse to come to his grace and to accept the forgiveness he offers in Christ Jesus, another fact which we have established by passages cited above, then we

have to believe that retribution for the sins of those who reject Christ will then have been exacted not once, but twice. Jesus paid the price for the sins of all men. But those who will not turn to him in obedient faith, those who reject his sovereignty and his reign in their lives, will be required to suffer the consequences of their rebellion, and that, eternally. God will have chosen to pay for their sin the first time; they will have chosen to pay for it a second.

**Retribution for the sins of those who reject
Christ will have been exacted not once, but
twice.**

Could anything be more tragic? At a terrible price to the Creator of the universe, the penalty has been paid, the door has been opened, the way cleared and the invitations sent out. All men can come to God through Christ and receive forgiveness of their sins and a promise of eternal life with the Lord in the presence of his holy angels. This is the gift of God to all humanity. To accept it means tremendous joy; to reject it means unbearable anguish. Such is the law of retribution that God has established, and that he will apply to all.

Retribution, the inescapable law of the universe, will be applied even when the universe no longer exists. Its name for the righteous will be heaven; its name for the wicked will be hell. There never has been, and there never will be, an in-between.

6

THE CHRISTIAN AND VENGEANCE

Though it is difficult and even impossible to find a precise, biblical solution to all situations, real and hypothetical, it is possible to establish some principles for general guidance. That will be the concern of this chapter.

One reason why vengeance is not permitted us is probably our natural tendency to go too far, to want to go one-up, or even three or four-up. Moderation and restraint are not characteristics of man's vengeance upon his enemies. Another reason has been suggested by the teaching of the last chapter. God has already punished every sin that can be committed against us. Perhaps we could say that he has not punished the person, but we can indeed say that the sin itself has already received its retribution, in the sacrifice of Christ upon the cross.

Chapter five also suggested that those who refuse to come to the Christ to receive the forgiveness he has obtained for them will be obliged to suffer retribution for their sins, a retribution that has already been paid. In their case, then, the retribution will have been exacted twice.

On judgment day, every human being will necessarily throw himself upon the grace of God, for none will deserve the forgiveness offered; but only those who have already placed their confidence in the grace of God during their life on earth will be heard. For the others, the time for receiving God's mercy will already have ended. This is another reason why our witness to those who persecute us should not be one of retribution; if we respond in love, we may be used as instruments of God to save those persecutors from what the book of Revelation calls the second death (Rev 20:14; 21:8).

One author says this about the Christian and vengeance:

We, as his people, are called to match insult with blessing, scowls with smiles, hate with love, bitterness with forgiveness.¹

This teaching is correct, of course; however, we could perhaps imagine some special circumstances where this analysis might seem somewhat incomplete. Antagonism can take many forms. When it becomes life-threatening physical violence, may we only respond with smiles and blessing?

David, already anointed as the king of Israel, has to undergo a terrible series of hardships before assuming his throne. One of these is that of being pursued by Saul, who wants him dead. But although David has several opportunities to avenge himself on his aggressor, he steadfastly refuses to do so. The reason? Saul is God's anointed one, the current king. David's esteem and fear for the God of heaven is such that he cannot bring himself to lift his hand against one who has been chosen by this God, even if that person is persecuting him. But David does not exclude God's own vengeance on such a persecutor. He even calls upon the Lord to requite Saul for his evil actions:

*May the LORD avenge me upon you;
but my hand shall not be against you.* 1 Sam 24:12

Could a Christian say this?

Later on, when Nabal insults David, Nabal's wife Abigail restrains David from taking vengeance on her husband. David is so grateful for this that he later pronounces blessings on her for her good sense and for having kept him from *bloodguilt*, i.e., from having avenged himself with his own hand (1 Sam 25:33). But when Nabal is struck down by the Lord himself, David exults and blesses God. Could a Christian do this? Here is what David says:

*Blessed be the LORD who has judged the case of Nabal's
insult to me; and has kept back his servant from evil; the
LORD has returned the evildoing of Nabal upon his own
head.* 1 Sam 25:39

Much later on, when David is fleeing from before Absalom, he is insulted and maligned by Shimei the Benjaminite, who even throws stones

at the king of Israel (2 Sam 16). Remember that David would not lift his hand against Saul because Saul was the king of Israel. Now that David is himself the reigning monarch, how will he take such treatment from one of his subjects? David characteristically refuses to retaliate, in spite of encouragement to do so by his followers. And, later on, in 2 Samuel 19, when Shimei repents, David still refuses vengeance. In the first case he refuses because he feels that God must have told this man to curse him; in the second he refuses because he does not want to be putting people to death in a day of victory.

But now we must notice that on his deathbed, David gives these instructions to his son Solomon:

There is also with you Shimei son of Gera, the Benjaminite from Bahurim, who cursed me with a terrible curse on the day when I went to Mahanaim but when he came down to meet me at the Jordan, swore to him by the LORD, 'I will not put you to death with the sword.' Therefore do not hold him guiltless, for you are a wise man; you will know what you ought to do to him, and you must bring his gray head down with blood to Sheol.

1 Kings 2:8-9

How are we to understand this? Had David not given this man his oath that he would not kill him? Indeed he had. But he had not promised Shimei that another would not do so; and he most assuredly had not promised Shimei that he would never have to answer for insulting the Lord's anointed.

Solomon does not execute Shimei outright, but has him confined to residence, under penalty of death. Shimei agrees that this arrangement is fair. And it is only when he defies the order of the king that Solomon calls him, reminds him of his instructions, and announces:

You know in your own heart all the evil that you did to my father David; so the LORD will bring back your evil on your own head.

1 Kings 2:44

And so Shimei is executed and retribution is exacted upon him for his evil actions toward the Lord's anointed.

In 2 Chronicles 24:10-22, Zechariah, son of the priest Jehoiada, rebukes the people for their refusal to obey the Lord's commandments. At the command of king Joash, Zechariah is stoned by the people. As he is suffering this terrible death, Zechariah cries out:

May the LORD see and avenge! 2 Chr 24:22

Could a Christian say this?

In the Psalms, there are many outright calls for vengeance from the Lord. Here are just a few examples:

Break the arm of the wicked and evildoers. Ps 10:15

*Repay them for what their work, and according
to the evil of their deeds.* Ps 28:4

*Contend, O LORD, with those who contend with me;
fight against those who fight against me!
Take hold of shield and buckler, and rise up to help me!
Draw the spear and javelin against my pursuers;
and say to my soul, "I am your salvation."*

Ps 35:1-3

In your faithfulness, put an end to them. Ps 54:5

Let death come upon them. Ps 55:15

Break the teeth in their mouths. Ps 58:6

Spare none of those who treacherously plot evil.
Ps 59:5

*My God will let me look in triumph on my enemies.
Do not kill them, or my people may forget;
Make them totter by your power, and bring them down.
Let them be trapped in their pride.
Consume them in wrath (...) until they are no more.*

Ps 59:10-13

- Let the wicked perish before God.* Ps 68:2
- Pour out your indignation upon them,
And let your burning anger overtake them.* Ps 69:24
- May they have no acquittal from you. Let them
be blotted out of the book of the living.* Ps 69:27-28
- Let my accusers be put to shame and
consumed.* Ps 71:13
- Pour out your anger.* Ps 79:6
- Pursue them with your tempest and terrify them with
your hurricane.* Ps 83:15
- Let them perish in disgrace.* Ps 83:17
- Give to the proud what they deserve!* Ps 94:2
- Let burning coals fall upon them!
Let them be flung into pits, no more to rise!* Ps 140:10

Whatever else might be said about these imprecatory verses, at least we are not in the dark as concerns their intent. These are powerful calls for awful retribution from the Lord. Could a Christian say these things?

A favorite Psalm of many is the 139th. It contains some of the most beautiful and precious thoughts of the Christian faith. It describes the omniscience of God:

*O LORD, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
O LORD, you know it completely.* vs. 1-4

It describes the omnipresence of God:

*Where can I go from your spirit?
 Or where can I flee from your presence?
 If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
 if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
 If I take the wings of the morning
 and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
 Even there your hand shall lead me,
 and your right hand shall hold me fast.
 If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
 and the light around me become night,"
 Even the darkness is not dark to you;
 the night is as bright as the day,
 For darkness is as light to you.* vs. 7-12

It describes the great power of the Creator:

*For it was you who formed my inward parts;
 you knit me together in my mother's womb.
 I praise you, for I am fearfully and
 wonderfully made.
 Wonderful are your works,
 that I know very well.
 My frame was not hidden from you,
 when I was being made in secret,
 Intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
 Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
 In your book were written all the days
 that were formed for me,
 When none of them as yet existed.* vs. 13-16

And it finishes with a powerful word of praise:

*How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
 How vast is the sum of them!
 I try to count them — they are more than the sand;
 I come to the end — I am still with you.* vs. 17-18

But no, David is not quite finished. After these wonderful words, these words of praise and thanksgiving, these words of exaltation and humility before the Lord, he adds the following:

*O that you would kill the wicked, O God,
and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me —
those who speak of you maliciously,
and lift themselves up against you for evil!
Do not I hate those who hate you, O LORD?
And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?
I hate them with perfect hatred;
I count them as my enemies.* vs. 19-22

How many times have readers of God's word hesitated to read this diatribe to the assembled Church, after having read the beautiful sentiments that precede? Indeed, these words are often omitted from the public reading of this psalm. Instead, at verse 19, we skip down to the conclusion of the psalm, which takes up again the lovely thoughts of the beginning:

*Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.* vs. 23-24

**How many times have readers of God's word
hesitated to read this diatribe to the assembled
Church, after having read the beautiful
sentiments that precede?**

What can we do with such railing hatred as David expresses in the middle of such noble thoughts? Again, could a Christian say these things? If, indeed, we consider these attitudes unworthy of a child of God, let it be remembered 1) that David was a man after God's own heart (1 Sam 13:14), 2) that the Messiah did not hesitate to wear David's name (Ezek 37:24-25; Mt 21:9, etc.), and 3) that similar language can be found in the New Testament, right in front of the throne of God:

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given; they cried out with a loud voice, "Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?" Rev 6:9-10

These are the souls of Christian martyrs; and they call for vengeance. The following verses indicate that far from being informed that Christians should not say such things, they were instead given white robes and told to be patient, until their number should be complete. In addition, Revelation 19:1-2 shows us a great crowd in heaven rejoicing in the fact of God's vengeance upon *the great whore for the blood of his servants*. In other words, not only did God not reject the prayer of his people for revenge, he responded to that prayer by accomplishing what his people asked.

But, let us come back to the Old Testament, and to the Proverbs, where we have perhaps the best description of what should be the general attitude of a child of God toward vengeance.

We will list four passages that treat this subject, then draw some conclusions:

- 1) *Do not say, "I will do to others as they have done to me; I will pay them back for what they have done."*
Prov 24:29
- 2) *Do not say, "I will repay evil"; wait for the LORD, and he will help you.*
Prov. 20:22
- 3) *If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat; If they are thirsty, give them water to drink; for you will heap coals of fire on their heads and the LORD will reward you.*
Prov. 25:21
- 4) *Do not rejoice when your enemies fall, and do not let your heart be glad when they stumble, or else the LORD will see it and be displeased, and turn away his anger from them.*
Prov 24:17-18

From these passages, and from what we have already seen, we can safely conclude the following:

- 1) Our place is not to avenge harm done to us. This is not to be a personal concern at all, even though we have been wronged or otherwise injured.
- 2) However, not being the avengers of wrongs done to us does not exclude that vengeance will indeed be wrought upon the perpetrators of evil toward us. To *wait for the LORD*, as Solomon suggests in Proverbs 20:22, is to assume God's vengeance, and even to expect it. This is confirmed by the passage by which we began this study, Romans 12:19.

*Beloved, never avenge yourselves,
but leave room for the wrath of God.*

- 3) Our place is not to avenge ourselves. But neither is it to ignore that evil deeds will bring retribution. And how can we show this? Not by rejoicing when enemies fall. God should then turn against us for such an attitude. We are to do good, even to our enemies, in such a way as to heap shame upon them for their evil ways. Will they in fact be touched by such compassionate behavior? The text does not say. But our responsibility remains the same in any case. The Proverbs 25:21 text is quoted by Paul in Romans 12:20. The teaching he gives is therefore neither new nor revolutionary. God has always felt this way about the reaction of his people to their aggressors.

Jesus, then, was not changing the will of God concerning vengeance when he said that we are to treat others as we would be treated (Mt 7:12), or that we are not to respond in kind to the evildoer (Mt 5:39-46), or that we are to love our enemies if we would be like the Father (Mt 5:43-48). Paul summarizes all of this when he says:

*Do not be overcome by evil,
but overcome evil with good.* Rom 12:21

Practically interpreted, this means that when it comes to physical violence, we simply must not respond physically; when it comes to social injustice, we must not stand on "rights"; and when it comes to governmental oppression, we are to comply, as long as we are able. We must remember that when Jesus was persecuted, he neither responded in kind, nor threatened, but rather *entrusted himself to the one who judges justly* (1 Pet 2:23).

Does this mean that a Christian may not defend himself or his family against any kind of physical aggression? To answer this we must establish the difference between revenge and defense. The first is striking back in response for evil suffered. The second is doing what can be done to prevent the persecutor from harming us in the first place. While the Bible indeed forbids the first, its teaching on the second is much less categorical.

For example, when Jesus says, *Do not resist an evildoer* (Mt 5:39), he gives examples of what he means. If we are struck we are not to strike back; if we are sued for our coat, we should give our cloak also; if we are forced to go a mile, we should go the second mile (vs. 39-41). These are all responses to established, you-can't-get-out-of-it aggression, and they exclude any kind of vengeance or getting even. But look at this. Jesus, in a situation where his life was in danger, *hid himself* (Jn 8:59). Should he have remained calmly in place and allowed the crowd to stone him, in application of his teaching to *not resist the evildoer*? Of course not. He advocated no passive standing by to allow or to invite evil to be done to us; but rather he taught that when we are indeed victims of evil, we must not become like our persecutors by responding in kind.

To love our neighbor as ourselves (Mt 22:39, cf. Lev 19:18) is commanded. To love him more than ourselves is not commanded. Shall we decide that if he decides to physically assault us, we may do nothing to prevent it? This is neither the spirit nor the letter of Jesus' commandment. We must not stretch his teaching so far as to render it senseless. Shall a husband, whose God-given role is to provide for and protect his wife and family (1 Tim 5:8), love an evildoer even more, enough to passively allow him to decimate precious loved ones? Is Jesus' teaching, given for man's good, to be made to be detrimental to him? Isn't this what the Pharisees were doing with the sabbath law, making it into an

end in itself, and thereby turning it against themselves? *The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath*, Jesus said (Mk 2:27). Loving our enemies and praying for those who spitefully use us should not be extended to mean that we would encourage them to abuse us by a philosophy based more on a humanistic ideal than on the Scriptures.

Now let us observe Jesus as he puts into practice the principles he has taught. In John 18:22, when he is struck by an officer, he does not respond physically, but he does indeed interrogate his abuser:

*If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong.
But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?*

We have already noted that just because vengeance is not in our hands does not mean that vengeance will not be exacted upon those who mistreat us. This being the case, and following the example of Jesus, there is no reason why we should give the persecutor the impression that he is acting with impunity. In fact, we may actually be doing him a favor by pointing out to him the mistake that he is making. Perhaps he is not aware of his sin; perhaps all that stands in the way of his realizing his wrong actions is a controlled, firm word of rebuke from his victim, who refuses to respond in kind to the aggression.

Luther, perhaps referring to this incident, remarked that "God forbids self-defense with the hand, but not with the tongue". When Peter says in 1 Peter 2:23-24 that Jesus *did not return abuse and did not threaten, but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly*, he assumes that Jesus counted on God to avenge him. Which indeed God did. Every Christian who thus entrusts himself to God is therefore rightly counting on God's vengeance.

Now let us consider Paul. In Acts 23:2-3, when Paul is struck at the order of the high priest, he bristles:

God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! Are you sitting there to judge me according to the law, and yet in violation of the law you order me to be struck?

It is clear that Paul also felt that responding verbally was not forbidden. He even intimates that the aggressor has committed a condemnable act, i.e., that he is answerable to the retribution of God.

When it is pointed out to him that he is addressing the high priest, he retracts his threat, but with tongue in cheek. It seems indeed impossible that he should not know, as he says, that he was addressing the highest authority of the Jewish people. The remark is therefore probably to be taken as sarcasm.

Because vengeance is not in our hands does not mean that vengeance will not be exacted upon those who mistreat us.

In his teaching to the Churches, Paul addresses the problems of personal vengeance, with the text that began our study:

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Rom 12:19-21

This combines the lessons of Solomon (Prov 20:22; 24:19; 25:21) and those of the Christ (Mt 5:38-48).

But what of the retribution required by the State on evildoers? What relationship can the Christian have with this sort of vengeance? Here we must consult Peter and Paul, who spoke clearly on the matter. Let us remember that both speak with the authority of Jesus Christ, that both are his designated representatives, teaching exactly what he has ordered them to teach and giving information that he himself has given them.

Here is what Peter has to say:

For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to do right. For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

1 Pet 2:13-17

Clearly, Christians are to honor those in authority as having been sent to *do right*. And this is to be done in the context of our rightful fear of God. Paul takes this idea much farther, and gives us a glimpse into the working of God through the civil state:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due them — taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due. Rom 13:1-7

Paul, taught by the same Lord as Peter, arrives at the same conclusion as he. We are to honor those who are in positions of civil authority, regardless of their political bent. This is indeed a striking teaching, considering the Roman context in which these words were written. Without proposing that we put government above God (see Ac 4:19; 5:29), Paul makes it plain that Christians are to be good citizens.

Let us list the precise teachings of this paragraph:

- 1) All civil authority is established by God. See Daniel 4.9b on this point.
- 2) All are to be subject to this civil authority. To rebel against it is to rebel against the order God himself has established.
- 3) The best way to not fear the civil authority is to do good.
- 4) The civil authority bears the sword (possesses the right of life and death) with reason, and has the right to use that right to punish those who do evil.
- 5) Obedience is due, therefore, not only because it is right, but also for fear of the retribution of the State.

- 6) This obedience includes submitting to civil ordinances such as taxation.

The subject of our study requires that we look especially at number 4 in this list. Not only does God grant authority to the civil state to punish lawbreakers, but this authority also includes the penalty of death. A careful reading of the Bible will show that God has always granted this right to human civil authority. The fact that some States have abused this right, or that mistakes might be made because of errors in human judgment does not change this.

We have noted the biblical teaching that a Christian must not avenge himself. We are seeing that the civil state has a right to exercise retribution on those who would break its laws. What place has the Christian if he should be a representative of the State, an enforcer of the civil laws? In answer to this question, John R.W. Stott has this to say:

A Christian in the role of a policeman may use force to arrest a criminal, which in the role of a private citizen he may not; he may as a judge condemn a prisoner who has been found guilty, whereas Jesus told his disciples 'do not judge, or you too will be judged'; and he may as an executioner (assuming that capital punishment may in some circumstances be justified) kill a condemned man, although he is forbidden to commit murder.²

An objective look at these situations will help sort out their moral difficulties, though it would take a strong Christian to work out their emotional and personal implications. A Christian policeman, in the exercise of his duties, may use every tool legally at his disposal as a representative of the State, to stop crime and crime-doers. This normally includes the use of force and a lethal weapon, options open to him in the exercise of his duties as an officer of the State; he could not solicit them in his relations with others as a private citizen, and especially as an individual Christian. Needless to say, great judgment is necessary for those who bear arms to defend the civil laws of a nation. And even greater judgment is necessary for Christians who choose this sector of public service.³

The same moral implications are true for judges. As a Christian, a judge could not avenge himself upon, say, a man who robs him in the street. But when he sits in the judgment seat of the State, exercising the authority of the State, the retribution to which he sentences an evil doer is the vengeance of the civil authority, not of the human judge.

Fortunately, most democracies have strict rules to guarantee the objective nature of judges' decisions. But where such objectivity is not guaranteed, the fact remains that civil authority is still established by God and that Christian citizens are to submit to it.

The executioner is perhaps the best example of the principle we are looking at here. The executioner is not acting upon individual responsibility, and is not therefore personally liable for his act. He is, in that supreme moment, the human representative, the personification of the civil authority's sword-bearing, retributive duty, and as such he carries out the sentence that civil authority has imposed. There is no reason why a Christian could not occupy this position as well as another citizen.

As a conclusion to this chapter, let us reiterate. While vengeance does not belong to the individual, it is not wrong to desire and even to request that evil be punished. But these things are entirely in the hands of God. Meanwhile, the Christian is to do good to his enemies and to evil men, as God is good even to those who hate him. In addition, there is a difference between defending oneself and one's family on the one hand, and taking vengeance after the fact on the other hand. Also, a Christian who acts as a charge of the State in carrying out its God-given right to punish evil and evil men is not individually responsible to God for his legal actions.

Finally, the apostle Paul formulates a pattern for all Christians to follow in this delicate and disputed area, when he says.

Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ (...), standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and (being) in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing.

Phil 1:27-28

Our own Christian lives, therefore, are at the same time the evidence of the salvation that God has granted us and the proof of the eventual destruction of those who refuse this salvation. This is indeed the vengeance of God, to which we must leave room. God has planned it this way, and he will accomplish his purpose.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

If present practices prevail, western civilization hasn't long to live. The fact that even the most religious people often seriously underplay or completely ignore God's just vengeance indicates that we are leaning dangerously toward man's corrupted values as our standard of right and wrong. When this happens, when humanism raises its beautiful but ultimately deceptive face, the resulting moral decline is all but irreversible. And moral decline invites the vengeance of God.

The relatively recent emphasis on "rights" has something to do with this state of things. It is most interesting to observe that in the debate concerning an act that viciously tears away the lives of no less than 1.5 million living persons per year in the United States alone, those who perpetrate this act defend themselves by claiming their "right" over their own bodies. Aside from neglecting the fact that the body they are destroying is not their own, these people are guilty of elevating their human values (or lack of them) above the commandment of the God who made them. And this, in any society, will eventually lead to its destruction.

Why is this? Because, in spite of his belief to the contrary, man is not God, God is. When man forgets that he is the creature and not the Creator, nothing but trouble lies ahead. When he begins to take into his own hands and on his own responsibility the lives of others, he has sealed his own fate.

On the day of judgment, the souls of millions of children whose innocent blood was shed before they had a chance to be born will rise up and condemn this generation (see Mt 12:41, cf. Prov 6:16-19). And what will we say? That we had the "right" to kill them? Will the "socially acceptable" and "politically correct" be valid arguments when we stand before the judge of the living and the dead?

Or do we think there is no judgment coming? If there is indeed a final judgment coming, will the fact that most do not believe in it change anything of its reality — or of its severity? When the fall of a house is

imminent, will the fact that people are living in it unawares change anything on the day when the walls crumble? What good will it do then to stand over the dead bodies and lament that these poor souls thought the old place was solid?

As a Christian, I have often wondered why the world doesn't notice that after the application of its silly philosophies to our perennial problems, things aren't getting better.

The vengeance of God has always been implacably directed toward those who fail to respect his law. But killing is not our only sin, only the most obvious one. We will also be condemned for our decline into a cynical popularizing of evil. As one writer said, "We've lost our blush."¹

We have become enamored with entertainment, with majoring in pleasure, with living it up, with taking it easy. Television programs seethe with seamy language and sordid lifestyles which deify violence and mythicize the devil. Sexual aberrations of all kinds are fed and encouraged by televised talk shows where people proudly parade what should make them ashamed. Drug and alcohol addiction are no longer treated as wrongs, but as illnesses, from which its "victims" are never "recovered" but always "recovering". Instead of calling for the rejection of the sin that introduced AIDS to society, we ignore reality and treat the symptoms, giving condoms to lust-filled youngsters and needles to addicts, convincing ourselves glibly that we are making them "safe". It has now become not only possible but desirable to advocate what the Bible calls *impurity, degrading passions, and unnatural intercourse* (Rom 1:24, 26-27), i.e., homosexuality, as an "alternate lifestyle" deserving of every consideration by a tolerant and compassionate public. Indeed, the homosexual community has become militant and aggressive, practicing "a kind of in-your-face activism designed to shock, defy, and intimidate anyone who dares suggest that their lifestyle is sinful."²

Who is kidding whom?! As a Christian, I have often wondered why the world doesn't notice that after the application of its silly philosophies to our perennial problems, things aren't getting better. Shouldn't the reigning humanistic principles make a difference in the world, somewhere? But, in spite of declarations of human rights and non-aggression pacts

based on the "inviolable" word of men and nations, wars still tear peoples in pieces, cease-fires are still cynically ignored, overt treachery still rules, naked hate still abounds, and the world of human values would be a laughable place, were it not such a tragic spectacle.

The moral state of a nation can be said to be directly proportional to its own sense of conscience and of guilt. Mankind is never more noble than when he respects good, God's good, and when transgressing that good brings genuine sorrow. When guilt for wrongdoing is erased or repressed, the door is open to every kind of hysterical violation of decency and right, wrongs which are blamed on God, on the government, on the environment, on society, on the other person, in short on anyone and everything except oneself. Absurdity becomes the stuff of everyday life. As F. LaGard Smith has said:

The frantic struggle of some of today's brightest minds to parrot the politically correct party line and yet avoid the obvious moral absurdities when that line is pushed to its logical extreme is not a pretty picture.³

What is frightening about this is that God, whose standard of righteousness will not be lowered, cannot and will not stand by indefinitely and allow the kind of twisted behavior that characterizes modern society, but will requite according to their works the perpetrators of all injustice. In our study of vengeance, we have seen example after example of this principle at work. When it will be applied, to an individual or a nation, is a matter of time determined by God himself. But it will be applied.

What is even more frightening is that the Church is not always on the leading edge of the fight against the evil of humanism. Indeed, the Church participates in many of the activities that encourage it. Am I being unfair? I have only to cite the modern Church's preoccupation with "felt need" and "self-esteem" theology, which not only fails to deal with the fact and the consequences of sin, but actually teaches Christians unconsciously to think that how they feel about themselves is more important than how God feels about them: Well-meaning brethren too often soothe us into spiritual unconsciousness with the warmth and comfort of unconditional forgiveness, limitless compassion, and loving refusal to hold us accountable for our sins.

We have so feared to offend that we have forgotten to fear the Lord. We love to eat together, play together, sing together, study together, even

pray together — but how often do we denounce each other's sin? How often do we teach that it has to be dealt with? How often do we place confrontation of a person with his lostness over his good feelings about himself? I am not advocating that we should bludgeon each other in the name of the Lord, or brutally execute weak or fallen brethren in God's name. I am saying rather that softness with sin, beginning with our own, is a fault that calls for drastic action from a God of holiness.

*For the time has come for judgment to begin with
the household of God.* 1 Pet 4:17

If the study of the vengeance of God has proved anything to the author of this book, it is that this vengeance will always be applied when and where it is needed. We must stop concentrating on satisfying the urgent human desire to rid oneself of feelings of guilt. We should rather make it understood, to ourselves and to others, that we are all unworthy of the love of God, and that we do indeed deserve to be punished for our wrongdoing.

Then and only then will we be ready to accept the grace that God has accorded us, in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth, who took our sin with him to the cross and there earned our salvation. Only then can we understand that the guiltless one is not ourselves but the Christ, that the worthy one is not ourselves but the Son of God, that the loving one is not ourselves but our Lord, and that the heaven that he promises us is not to satisfy our needs, but to glorify his name by bringing to himself the sons he has led to glory (Heb 2:10).



THE BLOOD OF ABEL - NOTES

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CHAPTER ONE - CLASSIC EXAMPLES

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CHAPTER THREE - THE PRINCIPLE OF RECIPROCITY

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CHAPTER FIVE - HEAVEN AND HELL

1. Stanley C. Baldwin, *What Did Jesus Say About That?* (Wheaton IL, Victor Books, 1980), p.138.
2. Adolphe Monod, *Première série de sermons* (Paris, 1860), pp. 374-375.

CHAPTER SIX - THE CHRISTIAN AND VENGEANCE

1. Mike Cope, *Righteousness Inside Out* (Nashville, Gospel Advocate Co., 1988), p.83.
2. Stott, *Ibid.*, pp. 303.
3. It is not the intention of this study to venture into the arena of the military and the responsibility of the Christian in warfare, for two reasons: 1) this is not our subject, and 2) the Bible does not take up the matter of what Christians must do when one civil authority declares war on another, and when Christians might be found to be in the service of both; the answers to the moral dilemmas thus created must therefore be found in the consciences of those concerned.

CHAPTER SEVEN - CLOSING THOUGHTS

1. Larry West, "World Radio News", May-June, 1994, p. 2.
2. John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Vanishing Conscience* (Dallas, Word Publishing Co., 1994), p. 68.
3. F. LaGard Smith, *The Cultural Church* (Nashville, 20th Century Christian, 1992), p. 89.