

1984

## Final Judgment

Dear Friends,

The subject of the final judgment is, for many of us, one about which we are content to entertain vague thoughts, or which we practically ignore altogether. I am sure that there are a number of reasons for this, but none of them are Biblical; for, in fact, the Bible is full of some pretty lurid teaching concerning the final judgment and hell. Jesus Himself refers to hell as a place where, ...*their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.* (Mk. 9: 48). In the Book of Revelation we find these words describing the destiny of those who worship the beast: *And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; and they have no rest day and night...* (Rev. 14: 11). Not only so, but the saints of God are pictured as rejoicing over this final judgment of the wicked, who are symbolically portrayed as a great harlot: *Hallelujah! Her smoke rises up forever and ever.* (Rev. 19: 3).

The awful nature of this subject would tend to drive us away from a consideration of it. The final judgment and hell stand as terrible realities which we would rather deny or ignore. Yet, I am discovering that when believers have an inadequate grasp of this subject, problems develop for them in several areas. They tend to develop an apathetic tolerance of sin in others, and a self-indulgent attitude toward sin in themselves. They also overlook an essential dimension of God's glory, namely, His holy justice.

Such inadequate thinking gradually but surely emphasizes the proximate to the exclusion of the ultimate. Present decisions and actions are not extrapolated to a unified end, or destiny; rather they are seen as ends in themselves. Ethics become situational, morality is relative, and sin is viewed as not much more than a mild annoyance—sort of like flies at a picnic, making things unpleasant, but really presenting no sufficient cause for the day to be ruined for mature adults.

It should be clear that when we idolize the here and now, making the decisions and actions of the moment to be ends in themselves, without reference to a final, absolute, holy, judgment of God, we trivialize the present, as well as jeopardize the future. For unbelievers, this ruinous process is complete, so that when the end comes they are compelled with vain desperation to cry out for the mountains to fall upon them and hide them from the wrath of the Lamb (Rev. 6: 16).

Yet, even the most saintly believers can be guilty of intermittent amnesia regarding the awesome realities of judgment, heaven, and hell that are surely to come. We all, in varying degrees, slip into the jading short-sightedness which makes the present and, indeed, all things seem trivial. That this is an undeniable fact to which even the best of us must admit our guilt seems evident from the reaction of the beloved apostle John, when he falls before the vision of the risen Christ as a dead man (Rev. 1: 17). Christ is more powerful and pure, and the service and destiny to which He calls each of His children is

more wonderfully worthy and meaningful than the most sensitive and loving soul begins to suspect. Accordingly, we are informed by this same beloved John that it is only to the extent that we fix our hope on Christ and His purity that we become pure (I Jn. 3: 3).

Granting all of the above, there may remain in us a deep reservation about the justice and necessity of this whole scheme. This reservation usually manifests itself not so much directly in our own personal interests, as it does in our feigned interest for others. The rich man in Hades (cf. Lk. 16: 19-31) asks Abraham to send Lazarus to warn others about their impending doom. Of course the tacit accusation in this is that God has no right to send the rich man himself, his brothers, or anyone else to the everlasting tortures of hell. Hence we learn that a tolerance of sin in others is really only a guise for sinful self-indulgence.

When the question centers on the necessity and equity of the final judgment, we have then lost sight, not of the judgment, but of the Judge. For example, we think of friends or even relatives who make no profession of faith in Christ, and the thought of them enduring the torment of eternal damnation alarms us. I admit that this should alarm us, but not to the point of ignoring the cause of such judgment, especially since we are not in a very good position to call the actions of the Almighty into question. For not one of us can claim to be an innocent, objective judge in this matter.

Being ourselves sinners, we too easily underestimate the exceeding sinfulness of sin. From our deficient and biased perspective we see that even bad people do good things, and we are inclined to inflate the importance of this, and impute moral merit where none actually exists. Yet from God's perspective (the absolutely true perspective) even a man's apparently righteous deeds are as filthy rags. The key to such a determination is the heart or motive. Admittedly, incidental good may issue from a depraved heart, as in the case of unbelieving Cyrus, who let the Jews return to their own land (Is. 45: 1-7). We may also think of the good done by the likes of a Beethoven, or even unbelieving doctors and nurses.

Holy character before a holy God is the issue, however. Only those who are clothed with the perfect righteousness of Christ can stand before God and receive not only an acquittal, but even rewards for deeds done in the power of and for the sake of the Savior. The heart which believes or does not believe, not the hand which does good or ill is therefore the ultimate thing to be judged. Think how faulty our assessment would be if we considered only the actions of an indulgent, versus a disciplining, adult in relation to a child, where the former is a deceitful kidnapper and the latter a faithful, loving parent. An even more striking example is that of Judas Iscariot in the final night of our Lord's life. His action was a kiss, implying love for Jesus. But in his heart was betrayal for the thirty pieces of silver that led to the crucifixion of the Lord of glory.

The Lord knows each person's heart perfectly. He will not make the slightest miscalculation in the final judgment of any soul. Therefore, my prayer is that through the knowledge of this truth, and through the penetrating and purifying oversight of our Savior and Judge, we will be led into a hearty pursuit of holiness, without which no man will see

the Lord. As we cultivate personal holiness, and pray for the establishment of holiness in the lives of others, we may have perfect confidence that the final day will reveal the essential quality of each man's work, to the glory of God's mercy and justice.

Expectantly yours,

William Harrell

## The Church: A Family

Dear Friends,

During a recent and most informative tour of a state facility for the handicapped I observed that the residents were divided into homogeneous groups. From this I realized afresh how inclined our society is to specialize, divide, and categorize all things into their apparently proper genus, species, and so on. I do favor making necessary distinctions, but I question whether our penchant for specialization and classification—all in the name of science and efficiency—is a blessing or a blight. Respecting the handicapped, in Sweden, for instance, the emphasis is on their incorporation into general society. The philosophical basis for this is the belief that handicapped people are not helped by their being put away with their own kind, nor is society in general helped by removing such people from the main flow of life. I think you get my point. Our society prefers division and separation, while others prefer incorporation.

The churches in our country have, for the most part, adopted this preference for specialization. I am incessantly reminded by many dear and well-meaning souls in other churches that when our church develops a host of special programs and activities, then we shall truly be doing the work of the Lord. Usually I simply listen to such talk, while maintaining the mental reservation: *Let's wait and see in the final day which sort of ministering results in reward, and which results in loss.* (cf. 1 Cor. 3: 10-15). For our vision of ministry is quite different from that which divides the church into homogeneous units based on special needs. I grow increasingly concerned with the detrimental effects which I see developing in churches whose members constitute not a body but an association of specialized groups.

In Immanuel, we strive for incorporation, and lay stress on the family nature of life in Christ's Church. Yet, I must qualify my use of the family model. Here I do not mean the increasingly typical American family, whose life is harried, and whose members know each other simply because they eat and sleep in the same house...sometimes. I was shocked recently to hear about a family research project which concluded that in the average family where husband and wife have been together for more than six years, virtually no meaningful communication takes place. This sad phenomenon cannot serve as our family model.

Because believers truly are united, or are made members of one body in Christ, our family, our church, must be bound together by deep ties of mutual love, respect, and commitment. This is not achieved when every person does that which is right in his own eyes. However, family worship of our heavenly Father, family meals—as we feed upon His soul-nourishing Word, and as we partake together of the Lord's Supper—and family work in regular meetings for corporate prayer, form the biblically recommended pattern (cf. Acts 2: 42). Whatever specialized ministry grows from this, it is clearly secondary in the sense that the foundation and goal of all true ministry is the corporate worship and enjoyment of our triune God. Paul highlights this truth in these words:

*So then you are... of God's household, having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together is growing into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit. Eph. 2: 19-22*

Notice from this that we grow and that we are built up in the faith together...not separated into homogeneous cells.

At this point, those of the atomization school of thought may seek to justify specialization by reminding us that there are people with special needs who will be left out or who will not develop properly in the context of corporate gatherings. It must be admitted that all of us require from time to time more or less personal attention. But it does not follow from this that we should erect a multitude of special programs, purportedly to meet these special needs. Some people are very slow in seeing that Christ wants to simplify, not complicate, our individual and corporate lives. However gradually they come to see this truth, we who do see it act irresponsibly when we allow the blind to prescribe by their demands the direction for themselves as well as for those with sight. People who see themselves and others with eyes other than the eyes of Christ make very grave errors of judgment. Consider the wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked Laodiceans! (cf. Rev. 3: 14-22).

The shocking truth is that there are those in the Church who would call darkness light and have us all plunge with them into an abyss. We must not follow them, nor should we allow them to destroy themselves. With gentle firmness we must seek to incorporate them into the family life of Christ's Church. They may want to grab their food and run off alone or with one or two buddies and eat in some dark corner of the house; but we must, by speaking the truth in love, inform them that they are not excused from the family meals, and that their bad manners are grieving their brothers and sisters, as well as their Father. The charge of our being insensitive to their special needs may be brought up, to which we must reply (only after we have examined ourselves in Christ's perfect light) that, with respect to their influence—which may well fracture the Church into an array of circus side-shows—we are insensitive, in the same way in which a healthy body is resistant to the encroachments of infection.

Admittedly, resistance to complicating and atomizing the family of the Lord is rather negative business. Yet it is absolutely necessary, and woe to the family whose head—or to change the image—woe to the flock, whose under-shepherds do not realize the necessity for such resistance, or who lack the courage and strength to ward off such invading malignant influences.

Life in the family of God is not all negative, however. For as we have seen in our recent studies of the book of Revelation, man's highest employment, his most fulfilling, ennobling, liberating, empowering, and delightful service, are found in the corporate worship of Almighty God (cf. Rev. 4: 8-11). What on earth can compare with that? Many lesser things make the attempt, but anyone who ultimately prefers such lesser

things betrays a lineage other than that which issues from God the Father through Jesus Christ our Lord by the Holy Spirit. The beloved apostle John teaches us to see this in stark terms: *Children ... even now many antichrists have arisen .... They went out from us, but they were not of us.* (1 J n. 2: 18, 19).

Therefore we must be very careful not to accept uncritically anyone's demand to have special needs satisfied via methods which tend to dissect or disintegrate the Church. What some perceive as needs may be a guise for the indulgence of something quite unholy. The true need is for us all to grow closer to the Lord together. We simply cannot do this separated from one another, as John reminds us: *If some one says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.* (1 Jn. 4: 20). If his words seem a bit negative, read on: *And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also.* ( Jn. 4: 21).

I can testify that I have experienced the warmth, love, and acceptance of some churches, and have rapidly found myself at the very heart of such fellowships. Why is that? It is surely not because we put personal acceptance and friendship, or even personal satisfaction of needs first. Instead, it is because we have sought Christ together. Where the unique savor and aroma of the risen Christ are manifested in the company of believing people, if we respond positively to this then we consequently look about and see that we have quite unconsciously become inter-woven with a host of dear souls who also seek Christ above all else. Such relationships can transcend time and space. Intimacy is achieved and maintained despite geographical and temporal separation. All the while we discover that we are becoming our best and truest selves through such corporate worship of the Lord. So I ask, can any of Christ's true children be satisfied with anything less than full family worship and work?

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

## A Call for Integrity

Dear Friends,

A major theme in my ministry is that of integrity. Much of any true pastor's work, as he seeks to minister God's Word to a congregation or to individuals, has to do with overcoming the disintegrating effects of sin. I trust that we all realize how sin has demolished us, and has reduced us to inadequate, fractured beings. Furthermore, I believe that this disintegrating tendency of sin accounts for much of the structural atomization in the congregational life of many churches—a concern which I sought to address in last month's letter. Now I would like to consider this matter a bit further in the slightly different light of the individual's worship of God.

There are two dimensions to investigate here. The first has to do with the integrity, or wholeness, of the worshiper. Paul tells us that we are to present our bodies as living, holy sacrifices to God, and that such presentation constitutes true worship (Rom. 12: 1). We know that he speaks here not only of our stated times for corporate worship, but also of our whole lives as being rendered to God in true worship (1 Cor. 10: 31 ). In addition, his use of the body image is significant. We are not only to worship at all times, but at all times we are to give ourselves entirely to God. It is easy to understand this when we think of giving our bodies to the Lord. Who would want to divide his body for any reason? Division of the body—the loss of a toe or an arm—is, at best, painful and dreadful, at worst, deadly.

However, integrated worship consists of more than simply having our bodies in the right place at the right time, as we go through the right actions. For the heart is involved as well: *...you shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, and with all of your soul, and with all of your mind, and with all of your strength.* (Mk. 12: 30). This, no doubt, is part of what Jesus had in mind when He informed the Samaritan woman that all true worshipers must worship God in spirit and truth (Jn. 4: 24 ). There the Master Physician touched upon that element in man—the spirit or the soul—which seems easy to divide, but which, when divided, is every bit as killing as having our bodies torn asunder.

The other dimension we must consider is that of—for lack of better wording—our maintaining God's integrity. This is not to say that we can divide God, ontologically. But the height of sin's audacity is seen in the attempts of some people to do just that. They would make God into something He is not. It is, for example, a common sentiment in our day to think of God as a God of love, but not as a God of just judgment. So it was in Isaiah's day:

*For this is a rebellious people, false sons, Sons who refuse to listen  
To the instruction of the Lord;  
Who say to the seers, "You must not see;"  
And to the prophets, "You must not prophesy to us what is right. Speak to us pleasant  
words,  
Prophecy illusions.*

*Get out of the way ...  
Let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel."*

*Is. 30: 9-11*

Jeremiah also had to contend with kindred reductionists in his day ( Jer. 14: 13 -16, for example). It is this sinful tendency in man against which the first two commandments speak (Ex. 20: 2-6). The vital truth of God's integrity is what Jesus refers to when He quoted Moses' words: *Hear, O Israel ; the Lord our God is one Lord...* (Mk. 12:29). Therefore we see that these related dimensions of integrity of the worshiper and integrity of God present us with a dual negative and positive challenge: (1) We must not attempt to worship the Lord part of the time, with part of our being; we must give ourselves entirely and at all times to the Lord. (2) We must not seek to divide God or reduce Him into something other than what He truly is; we must give ourselves entirely, at all times, to the one, true, living God.

I venture to say that we would all agree with the thoughts articulated above. Yet, speaking practically and pointedly, I have observed patterns of behavior and have encountered attitudes in our own church which reveal the spirit of disintegration. To some extent this is to be expected, since we all wrestle with residual sin until we die. However, it is when a complacent or defensive mode supplants the wrestling mode that we have something of a crisis on our hands. I do not say that we, as a fellowship, have reached that point...yet. Nevertheless, the results of vigilance in this matter will prove to be salutary, albeit costly.

What concerns me here is the dichotomous lives which I believe some, with varying degrees of consciousness, insist upon living. To illustrate, I can think of people whose lives at work or at home differ greatly from their lives in the Church. Why is it that some people, who can manage to hold down a job or make a home, who can find the resources to stand, and the strength and determination to sacrifice and suffer, perhaps frequently enduring the ire of imperious employers, undergo an amazing, debilitating sort of transformation when it comes to life and service in Christ's Church? I suppose this can be accounted for in part because we tend to don our spiritual and even psychological armor when we are in the world, whereas we prefer and expect to take our ease within the sanctuary of Zion . But do we have warrant to do this? It is one thing legitimately to run into God as a refuge, finding in Him security, and strength to be sent forth again into battle. It is quite another thing to use the Lord and His Church as an escape from reality and responsibility.

The deceitfulness of sin can lead us to conceive of the Church of Christ as an ivory palace, where no threats or alarms are expected or allowed. Then when reality imposes itself upon our fantasy, we fly to pieces, being caught completely unawares, and, having not expected trouble, we refuse to believe that there are resources to face the challenges.

Worldly people, beholding such repeated debacles in Christian fellowships, logically, though erroneously, conclude that the Church of Christ is a sickly, frail, feeble, old lady, more to be pitied and humored, than to be loved and respected. We help to project such



an image by our fearing or refusing manfully to wrestle with real problems as they arise in the Church.

We must not allow any spirit of escapism or idealism (which is closely related to idolatry) to lull us into thinking or acting as if the Church is like the old ballad's home on the range—where seldom is heard a discouraging word. The truth is that many frank words have been and will continue to be exchanged in any living church (cf. Mt. 16: 21-28, especially v. 23; and Gal. 2: 11-14). Nor must we be afraid faithfully and courageously to work through the various personal trials which encounter us even within the Church. Our failure to avail ourselves of the spiritual resources to do this, results not in growth and maturity, but, instead, leads to devalued relationships and disintegrated lives. No true marriage develops without its fights; no loving family goes through life unscathed by squabbles and crises. In a fallen world, such tribulations come with the territory, being not only permitted by our Lord, but being positively ordained by Him, as He sinlessly uses even man's sin to strengthen and purify the body of Christ.

My call, then, is for a full and mature faith which faces the truth of who we are in the Church, as well as in the world. My plea is for reality, as opposed to that sanctimonious hypocrisy which learns and then teaches others to honor the Lord with lips, while allowing the heart to be far from Him.

For those alarmed by such a call, I can only say that such alarm very likely betrays your own state of disintegration or deadly slumber. And as old George MacDonald has well said, *It is not the hysterical alone for whom the great dash of cold water is good. All who dream life instead of living it, require some similar shock.*

Sincerely yours,

William Harrell

## The Cross and Our Consecration

My Dear Friends,

This past winter has not been an easy one for our church. We have seen our ranks decimated by sickness, and there have been not a few spiritual tests which we have had to face. Even now, some members of Immanuel remain a bit sore in consequence of the Holy Spirit's scalpel having been applied deeply to their lives. The question we need to consider is: Why have all of these trials and tribulations now come upon us? I certainly have wondered about this.

The temptation here is to look for one great cause. For instance, if we were being disobedient, we could repent and hope that the heavenly discipline would cease. Or if we were suffering persecution because of our faithfulness, we could persevere by subsisting on the hidden manna of God's grace (*My grace is sufficient.*). Yet, I believe that the cause of our trials is complex and multifarious, rather than simple and singular. That this is so should not surprise us, since there are some of us who are disobedient, others who are faithful, with a spectrum ranging between. The marvelous thing about the Lord's sanctifying grace and His manifold wisdom is that He can accomplish diverse goals through a singular strategy. Our present tribulations, which He has ordained, serve to arouse the complacent, to warn the disobedient, and, in a mysterious but sweet way, to confirm the faithful in their obedience.

From this observation we can infer something about the ultimate goal of the Lord's working in our lives and fellowship. His proximate goals may be to arouse one, to warn another, to encourage yet another—as each has need—but His ultimate goal clearly is to make us, as individuals and as a fellowship, increasingly like the Lord Jesus. In other words, we are ever being called to deeper levels of consecration.

Our calling to deeper consecration—to greater separation for God, from self, sin, and Satan—demands from each of us unreserved commitment. Only then will we be able to stand against the power of residual sin and the strategies of Satan, as we progress from strength to strength in the Lord. Otherwise we shall back down when the fires get too hot, when the cost seems too high, and in backing down we shall be, in essence, selling our faith and abandoning our Lord, however piously we seek to cover our retreating sell-out.

Does all of this sound too much like grim duty? Is there not an easier way to live for the Lord? God's Word clearly, yet sympathetically, tells us that there is not. We simply cannot enter the kingdom of God except through tribulations (Acts 14:22), we cannot attain life except through death (Mt. 10: 39), we cannot worthily follow Christ unless we bear our cross (Mt. 10: 38). This is the cost of true discipleship which Jesus urges us to count before we heedlessly venture forth under His banner.

How does this fit in with love? Here we approach the heart of the issue. We may be tempted to drive a wedge between duty and delight, between law and love, and then,

naturally, choose love and delight over duty and law. But the Bible never hints at such a cleavage but rather united love and law number, as we perceive when we consider the number of times the declaration, *I love Thy Law, O Lord*, or some variation thereof appears in Psalm

119. God's Word has joined together duty and delight, and we seek to put them asunder, and choose one over the other, at our great peril.

The parable of the talents gives us a striking illustration of this (Mt. 25: 14-30). If we study it closely we see that no express command was given to the slaves to employ and multiply the talents. They were simply entrusted with the talents (v. 14). Yet two of them used their master's talents to increase his wealth and enhance his glory, while the other slave simply did his duty by keeping the master's talent safely buried.

This shows what I call the cryptic language of love. The Lord would have us to serve Him, and He expects us to serve Him, but this expectation is expressed with the greatest economy of language. Not only is it true that a word to the wise is sufficient, but it is even truer that a word to the loving heart is sufficient to secure right action. The Lord does not waste words on those who are merely duty bound. He speaks in the still small voice, telling us not to be...*as the horse or as the mule which have no understanding; whose trappings include bit and bridle to hold them in check.* (Ps. 31:9).

It is not unreasonable for our Lord to be so exacting in His expectations and yet so sparing in His words. Because if Christ dwells in us by faith, if we have accepted the love of God in Christ, we shall love Him in response, and our delight will be to do that which pleases Him. It is ever this way with love. Its language is poetic, conveying to the lovingly responsive heart whole worlds of thought, intention, and meaning in mere wisps of words.

The point is that there is no use in our seeking to shirk our duty by pleading love. The demands of true love are so much higher, so much more exacting, than are even the most grim demands of duty. *If you love-me*, said Jesus, *you will keep my commandments.* (Jn. 14: 15). Hence we see how our blessed Lord reiterates the marriage of duty with delight.

There is, of course, another attitude demonstrated in the parable of the talents. Such an attitude would say to Gods face: *I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed.... I was afraid, and ... hid your talent* (for safe keeping in accordance with mere duty); *see, you have what is yours.* (Mt. 25: 24, 25). Such a self-seeking, hireling's attitude is condemned (Mt. 25: 30). For such an attitude is the bargain basement, bare minimum mentality, which seeks salvation and consecration without a cross. It conceives of the Lord as being mean and demanding, and sees the cross of Christ as being only an implement of torture and death, threatening to spoil all of one's legitimate enjoyment (*you reap where you did not sow... meaning, that you want what is mine!*). Such a petty attitude is blind to the true nature of the cross; it is deaf to the true and beautiful lyrics of Horatius Bonar's hymn, which considers the cross in the words:

*All the love of God is yonder,  
Love above all thought and wonder,  
Perfect love that casts out fear!  
Strength, like dew, is here distilling,  
Glorious life our souls is filling,  
Life eternal, only here.*

My friends, the Lord calls us to Himself only through the cross of Christ. This not only involves our bestirring ourselves regularly to take in the Word, with all of its sweetness, but it also involves our faithfully living out the Word of God, with all of the bitter deaths inherent in such a life. For death in Christ is the way of true consecration. There is no other way. I am determined, by God's grace and power, not only to go this way myself, but as your pastor I am determined to lead those who would be Christ's true disciples in this costly yet fruitful path. He who has an ear to hear, let him hear; and he who has a loving heart to obey, let him arise, and enter into the way of repeated deaths to self, which leads to abundant, eternal life.

Sincerely yours,

William Harrell

