

# Is the Judgment Inimical to the Gospel?

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There is perhaps no greater impediment to the full knowledge of the good news for the Adventist than the doctrine of the investigative judgment. It is a pernicious twist turning the believer away from the finished work of Jesus Christ in his behalf toward the unfinished work of the Spirit in himself. This is not good news. The investigative judgment doctrine, though well-intentioned, is a contradiction of the gospel of the New Testament, and is incompatible with the assurance which comes through the righteousness of faith. Let us beware lest we be found preaching "another gospel" than that once delivered to the saints (Gal 1:7-9).<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

I fear that the author of the above statement does not understand either the gospel or the judgment. If he did, he would not pit them against each other as he does. In the present paper I hope to show that, far from being inimical to each other, the gospel and the judgment--by which I mean the investigative judgment as taught by Seventh-day Adventists for the last century and a half--are fully identical in form and substance. They are every whit the same. In both cases God uses His dealings with individuals to reveal the truth about Himself.

## God's Need for Intelligent Companionship

In an earlier paper I argued that one reason why God created our world in the first place was that He wanted and needed intelligent companionship and could only have it by creating beings capable of entering into it with Him. Here is the context for Gen 1:27 ("Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image'"). Having an infinite capacity for love He also has an infinite need to express love. The starry heavens are the best evidence of this. With so many suns there will be innumerable many worlds and on at least some of them examples of intelligent life (see Job 1:6; 2:1). Being infinite He has no deficiencies but does have needs. And if what I am saying is true, He wants us to understand what they are. This is one part of the truth about God. The need to express love is not a weakness on God's part but an important fact about His nature (see 1 John 4:8).

The human need not to be alone (see Gen 2:18) is part and parcel of what it means to be made in the image of God. This need, which he placed within us, resides in Him as well.<sup>2</sup> That is one reason why He made us as He did--so that by experiencing this need in ourselves we could recognize it when He reveals it in Himself. If He had never created, He also--although triune--would have been alone. "I am the Lord, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God" (Isa 45:5). If what He had wanted was splendid isolation, the story would require no telling nor would there have been anyone to hear or read it. But solitude is not what He wanted. And if at least some of His creatures had not been given the capacity to appreciate these things about

Him--i.e., if none of His creatures had been made in His image--then merely calling masses of variously organized living tissue into existence would not have satisfied His purpose for creating. It would not have satisfied His need for intelligent companionship. Understanding all things, He wanted also to be understood.

## God Revealed Himself in Christ

God has power we cannot begin to conceive of. He can speak a world, or a galaxy, or multiplied systems of nebulae of galaxies into existence or out of existence with a word. He towers over His creatures by an infinite margin. And so His power has all the potential of separating us from Him by an infinite margin, whereas the one most profound reason why we exist at all is to remove the separation--the aloneness--that He would feel without us.

From eternity God knew that sin would arise among His creatures. Without such freedom there could be no mutuality and this meant that we must be able to hate our Creator as well as love Him, to turn from Him as easily as toward Him. And yet God's need for genuineness in companionship was such as to outweigh the costs He knew it would incur. He would proceed according to plan knowing what His decision implied. When the event actually occurred and Lucifer--the angel who had been closest to Him--rebelled, the fact came as a disappointment but not a surprise. God did not allow sin to run its course in order to find out what would happen. He knew what would happen. The history of our planet is a demonstration, not an experiment. He gave Satan freedom to illustrate the nature of his proposed alternative system of government so that His creatures could choose intelligently between them.

Already infinitely below God in power and understanding, man through sin has become the victim of yet another level of separation, which to God is completely intolerable. And so, in the person of His Son, He came to us and became a man--one with us, "God with us" (Matt 1:23). In this way we could gain insight into His feelings toward us and the nature of His character. But He could only do this by laying aside the outward trappings of deity--all those characteristics which would otherwise distract our attention and make it impossible for us to know what He is really trying to say and what He is really like. And so, when Jesus came into our world, "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him" (Isa 53:2). How could an infinite God get across to His trembling subjects that He is "gentle and humble in heart" (Matt 11:29)? And if He asserted the fact using words alone, how could He convince them that what He said was true? The evidence of our senses would appear to contradict Him. But it is true. The infinite God, who resides in unapproachable glory, is humble in heart. He is just as Christ showed Him to be.

God is constantly serving in the most ignominious of ways. Without expecting the least particle of praise for it He maintains the molecules of the eyes with which we read things like the present paper and the atoms in the fingertips with which we turn the pages. Jesus assures us that "the very hairs of your head are all numbered" (Matt 10:30), and yet so much more is true. This, like so many other statements in Scripture, is a study in understatement. How often have we thanked God for sustaining specific atoms? We thank Him for other things--occasionally. But my point is that He is doing literally an infinity of things for us every moment that we never know He is doing and could not hope to thank Him for in any detail if we did.

In Christ's life on earth we find the above principles illustrated and epitomized in a form that we can hope to appreciate, at least in some degree. Always the Teacher, He was

constantly helping His disciples and others to understand the truth about God. We are told that Christ did not wait for a crowd to gather before starting to speak but would share His marvelous insights with the smallest number who had any desire to learn.<sup>3</sup> Wanting people to understand, serving in the most unassuming of ways--in this, as also in regard to the other traits of His holy character, He is "the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (Heb 1:3).

The gospel is the self-revelation of God in Christ. And what makes the news so good is that this is the kind of Being God is. If the Lord of the universe were inclined to cause us trouble, how very easily He could do so. But He desires our good. It is we who do not. What we desire is whatever we happen to see first. In all His rules for right living He is only trying to bless and benefit us. Unfortunately He sees our good on so expansive a level that it is easy to misinterpret His motives. We routinely mistake the motives of our best Friend for those of an enemy and the motives of our worst enemy for those of a friend. Such confusion is repugnant to God not only because it frustrates His efforts to bless and help us but also because it keeps us from understanding what He really has in mind.

## God Reveals Himself in the Judgment

Up to this point we have been talking about the gospel. But the judgment should be studied in exactly the same context. The judgment, second only to the incarnation of Jesus, is the clearest evidence we have in Scripture of God's need to be understood --to make His creatures party to His inmost thoughts. The cavil that He does not need to study books in order to know who are His is blasphemy. Of course He does not need to study books to learn who must be given up and who can be reclaimed from a sinful life and admitted into heaven. From eternity He knew what our thoughts would be toward Him and what His thoughts would be toward us. The problem is that nobody else did. Wanting His creatures to know the nature of His government and of His character, He had to reveal these things. But He could not do so, even to unfallen angels, surrounded as He was by infinite glory. And so in Christ He laid all the glory aside:

- (6) Who, being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God something  
to be grasped,
- (7) but made himself nothing,  
taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.
- (8) And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to death--  
even death on a cross! (Phil 2:6-8)

In view of these facts we can see how very wrong Peter was when he tried to remove the cross from Christ's life (see Matt 16:22) and why Christ responded to Peter as He did (see vs. 23). Without the cross the one most essential point of the incarnation could not have been made. The cross is what Christ's whole life was for. He was born to die. His humiliation already would have been virtually infinite even if He had accepted human nature at a time before Adam's fall, which He did not. He was born during the reign of Caesar Augustus, "while Quirinius was governor of Syria" (Luke 2:2). Just in case there is any doubt on this point, Quir-

inius lived many long years after Adam. Christ drained the cup to its bitterest dregs. He came all the way down to the earth and lived among us, as one with us.

It was not foreign to His nature to humble Himself in the above manner, or to explain things to those with little understanding. Even in the wilderness temptations He met Satan's mind by sending him away as He did.<sup>4</sup> He met the mind of the woman at the well by telling her things she did not want Him or anyone else to know. He met the mind of Nicodemus by apparently changing the subject. He met the mind of Peter, who denied Him three times (the last time with cursing), by giving him three opportunities to reaffirm his loyalty. And He meets our minds in Scripture as we spend time with Him each morning before the day begins.

Just so, in the judgment God meets the minds of His other creatures--those on other planets throughout the universe whose inhabitants did not sin like Adam. And He does it by the same means that Jesus used when He was on earth. Jesus revealed God to mankind by dealing with individual men and women. By dealing with Peter as He did, Christ shows that our God deals with men like Peter in the way that He dealt with him. By dealing with the woman at the well as He did, Christ shows that our God deals with people like her in the way that He did in fact deal with her. Other examples that could be mentioned here make up the story of the four gospels. And as the colophon to the gospel of John states, "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written" (John 21:25).

In the judgment our God shows in exactly the same manner--by coming down to individual cases--over and over again that He deals with people like those under review just as He did in fact deal with them. So how did He deal with them? And why should He stoop to explain? In doing so He is exhibiting exactly the same characteristics that Jesus showed us during His life on earth. His willingness to open His dealings with mankind and His decisions concerning them to public scrutiny reveals a humility no different in kind from that manifested in the incarnation. The judgment is not for His benefit but for those looking on (see Dan 7:9-10). By inviting them to attend He is ministering to their needs no less surely than Jesus did with His disciples when He washed their feet on the night He was betrayed. God has a deep concern that His creatures understand His dealings with them--no less in the judgment than in the sermon on the mount.

What has been the context for God's dealings with His human children--in the church and in the world? To answer this question is to explain why the book of Revelation takes such an interest in the history of events to take place between Christ's ascension and His second coming. The entire book of Revelation is a transcript of the course later followed by the judgment. The book throughout has a courtroom setting--beginning with chaps. 4-5 and ending with chap. 19. The letters, seals, trumpets, plagues, and the supporting material that accompanies them--provide the background against which each life in the remaining centuries before Christ's return would be lived. And the main point that the court draws from each case brought before it is that God has been fair in issuing the decision that He does.

Here also is the context for Dan 8:14, which states that the sanctuary--the seat of God's government--is the primary object cleansed or vindicated in the judgment. The cleansing of the sanctuary has implications for those who direct their worship to the sanctuary, it is true. But the sanctuary or heavenly court itself is the main object cleared of wrong doing: "then shall the sanctuary be cleansed" (Dan 8:14, KJV).

God does this by showing in detail how He has dealt with each individual whose life comes under review. After each case is heard the four living creatures, the twenty-four elders, and everyone in the vast gallery (see Dan 7:9-10) can only marvel at God's good and gracious dealings with each person, saved or lost.

(9) Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, (10) the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say:

(11) "You are worthy, our Lord and God,  
to receive glory and honor and power,  
for you created all things,  
and by your will they were created  
and have their being." (Rev 4:9-11)

If this is not the judgment, what is it? And if it is the judgment, how does it differ from the gospel? In both cases God reveals Himself by putting on public record His dealings with individuals. In both cases He is seeking to be understood.

## Discussion

We should stop taking so shortsighted and egocentric a view of both the gospel and the judgment. If it gets us saved, the gospel is good. If it makes us responsible for anything we have done, the judgment is bad. Away with this kind of thinking! God does not expose the record of our lives to embarrass us or to catch us in our words. Jesus had ample opportunity to expose the men who brought Him the woman taken in adultery. He could have done the same thing when this same woman poured her jar of lavishly expensive perfume on His feet at Simon's feast and Simon despised both Him and her in his heart.

On the one occasion Jesus quietly stooped and wrote in the dust (i.e., as privately and with as little permanence as circumstances would allow) the sins of those who were willing to have a woman condemned to death if by doing that they could only trap Jesus. But the woman was not executed as they had hoped. Christ let her go with that gratitude welling up in her heart which would soon overflow so beautifully at Simon's feast. When Simon despised Jesus in his heart for allowing the woman to pour ointment on His feet, Jesus showed that He read His host's thoughts and yet had no desire to embarrass him.<sup>5</sup> This is the kind of God we worship. In the judgment will He deal with us any differently than He has with these individuals and with us all our lives up to that time? How much confidence in Him do we show by doubting that He will?

If the gospel is the revelation of God in Christ by His wise and gracious dealings with individuals such as the ones we have mentioned, and if the judgment is yet another revelation of that same God by the same means of tracing His dealings with individuals, how are these two processes inimical to each other? Indeed, how are they different at all? I submit that the judgment is to the universe at large as the gospel is to those living on this one fallen planet. It is an expression of His desire to be understood by His creatures. Now consider Rev 19:6-8, which shows us the final scene in the judgment before Christ returns to earth:

(6) Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting:

"Hallelujah!  
 for our Lord God Almighty reigns.  
 (7) Let us rejoice and be glad  
 and give him glory!  
 For the wedding of the Lamb has come,  
 and his bride has made herself ready.  
 (8) Fine linen, bright and clean,  
 was given her to wear." (Rev 19:6-8; see also  
 vss. 1-5)

I challenge my readers to adopt an attitude toward the judgment like that of the four living creatures, the twenty-four elders, the "great multitude" in Rev 19:6, and the "Thousands upon thousands" and "ten thousand times ten thousands" in Dan 7:10. For them every part of the judgment is an occasion for solemn joy because of what it reveals about God. If we do not share their attitudes, what does that fact tell us about ourselves? How happy would we be if we had to spend eternity in a place where things were viewed so differently from the negative way we thus show ourselves willing to view them? Let us ponder these things now while we can still benefit from doing so.

Can we find the investigative judgment in Scripture? This is like asking whether we can find the book of Revelation in Scripture. Virtually the entire book describes--in great detail--the sorts of evidence that would be considered there. If the judgment is not biblical, the book of Revelation is not biblical. But granting that there is a judgment, let us have the same attitude toward it as those present at the proceedings. Let us unite our voices with theirs as they offer praise to God for being in every circumstance just as He has shown Himself to be. To show us such things He had to be specific. An assertion of fairness would be no more convincing than an assertion of humility. There must be evidence on which to base the claim. One purpose of the judgment is to supply it.

## Conclusion

There is a practical side to God's desire to be understood. A misunderstanding in regard to His nature lay at the bottom of Lucifer's revolt. "I will make myself like the Most High" (Isa 14:14). It is good to be like the Most High. But what is He like? Lucifer thought the most significant thing about God was that He receives worship and honor. God does receive worship and honor, and deserves more than He gets, but He is also "gentle and humble in heart" (Matt 11:28), constantly serving His creatures' needs. It is not only God's desire that we understand Him intelligently. It is imperative for our own well-being and the good of the universe that we do so. Such knowledge is not optional.

Knowing what God is like we can only praise Him for being that way. In offering such praise we show that we are in harmony with the entire unfallen universe. But if we are not in harmony with it and feel that our God is not one who deserves wholehearted praise--especially because of what the judgment is now in the process of revealing about Him--then that fact should make us stop and think. We should carefully evaluate our position to see whether it is one we wish to maintain. Being in fundamental disagreement with the court is not a sound basis on which to expect a favorable verdict. On the other hand, the attitude exhibited by Paul in Rom 7 is one of the surest evidences that he would pass its review in grand form. And anyone

sharing such attitudes about his own condition relative to Christ can expect a decision in the judgment similar to the one awaiting Paul (see 2 Tim 4:8).

When we read the gospels and say that God's self-revelation in Christ's earthly life is good but then protest that His self-revelation in the judgment is bad, we turn the tables and sit in judgment on God in the negative sense of condemning His actions. This is the wrong position to occupy. I submit that when we understand both what the gospel is and what the judgment is, we will not pit them against them against each other as though they disagreed. They do not. Instead they are two complementary parts of one process by which God reveals Himself to His creatures in Christ. "Let God be true, and every man a liar" (Rom 3:4).

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<sup>1</sup>Bart Willruth, *Evangelica*, February 1981, pp. 8-9.

<sup>2</sup>See Hardy, "What Augustine Did Not Tell Us About the Nature of Man," *Historicism* No. 25/Jan 91, pp. 32-52.

<sup>3</sup>"The Saviour did not wait for congregations to assemble. Often He began His lessons with only a few gathered about Him, but one by one the passers-by paused to listen, until a multitude heard with wonder and awe the words of God through the heaven-sent Teacher" (Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* [Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1940], p. 194).

<sup>4</sup>"Satan had questioned whether Jesus was the Son of God. In his summary dismissal he had proof that he could not gainsay. Divinity flashed through suffering humanity. Satan had no power to resist the command. Writhing with humiliation and rage, he was forced to withdraw from the presence of the world's Redeemer. Christ's victory was as complete as had been the failure of Adam" (ibid., p. 130).

<sup>5</sup>"Simon was touched by the kindness of Jesus in not openly rebuking him before the guests. He had not been treated as he desired Mary to be treated. He saw that Jesus did not wish to expose his guilt to others, but sought by a true statement of the case to convince his mind, and by pitying kindness to subdue his heart. Stern denunciation would have hardened Simon against repentance, but patient admonition convinced him of his error. He saw the magnitude of the debt which he owed his Lord. His pride was humbled, he repented, and the proud Pharisee became a lowly, self-sacrificing disciple" (ibid., pp. 567-68).