### God’s Justice

**1. Biblical Data**

We begin our survey of the biblical view of God’s justice by examining the testimony of the earliest period of biblical history in the Torah and book of Job. In the first chapters of Genesis, Yahweh already found it necessary to render judgment on the sin of Adam and Eve. The punishment inflicted is outlined in Gen 3:16-19, the consequences of which we all now experience in our personal lives. In these chapters it is also interesting to note that Cain was not punished with death for slaying his brother (Gen 4:11-12).

Later in Genesis, we read that the Lord judged the world because of its wickedness, destroying it with a flood (Gen 6-9). Similarly, He destroyed the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by raining down on it brimstone and fire (Gen 19:24). In Genesis 20, we see where God “closed fast all the wombs of the household of Abimelech because of Sarah,” since he had taken her for himself, not knowing that she was Abraham's wife (Gen 20:18). Consequently, God healed them in answer to Abraham’s prayer (v. 17).

In the remaining books of the Torah, we note the following features. Again, we encounter the principle of punishment for offspring of the wicked (Ex 34:7). Moreover, God can punish immediately (Num 14:36-37; 15:32-36; 16:31-35; 46-49), or may delay it for a future time (Ex 32:33-34). Yet, He does not leave the guilty unpunished (Num 14:18).

Yahweh punished not only Israel, but also the Gentile nations (Deut 9:4; Num 31:1-3) for practices he warns Israel not to imitate (Lev 18:24-29; 20:22-23). The Law of Moses proscribed the principle “eye for eye, tooth for tooth” (Lev 24:20). We see an interesting example of this principle where for forty days of rebellion in the wilderness, Yahweh punished Israel with forty years of wandering in it (Num 14:34). The Law also established a sacrificial system for the forgiveness of sins, which sometimes required restitution (Lev 4-6). Finally, we observe instances of Yahweh’s just recompenses. For example, since Israel labored many years in Egypt without pay, God gave them plunder from Egypt (Ex 11:1-3).

The Torah also testifies of God’s wrath. For example, He was angered by Israel’s grumbling in the wilderness (Num 11:1, 10, 33), when Aaron and Miriam envied Moses’ privileged position (Num 12:9), and when Israel turned to idols (Deut 32:21; Deut 29:22-28). Yahweh speaks of Himself as “a jealous God” (Deut 6:15; 7:4) and “a consuming fire” (Deut 4:24). Israel could provoke Him to the point that He would “delight over you to make you perish and destroy you” (Deut 28:63).

Through Moses, Yahweh describes the frightening consequences of experiencing His wrath:

I will heap misfortunes on them; I will use My arrows on them. {They will be} wasted by famine, and consumed by plague and bitter destruction; and the teeth of beasts I will send upon them, with the venom of crawling things of the dust. Outside the sword will bereave, and inside terror – both young man and virgin, the nursling with the man of gray hair (Deut 32:23-25; сf. 32:41-42).

The book of Job reveals two aspects of God’s justice – punishment of sinners and support for the oppressed: “He does not keep the wicked alive, but gives justice to the afflicted” (Job 36:6). This book contains other references to Yahweh repaying the wicked (see Job 31:2-3). This truth served as the basis for the “friends” of Job to accuse him of sin. However, Job warned them that God’s judgment applied to them also (Job 19:28-29). The book of Job, along with other biblical books, teaches that God repays people according to their deeds (Job 34:11). Mention is also made of the principle that offspring can also suffer for the sins of their fathers (Job 27:13-14).

In the Old Testament historical books, Yahweh judged the inhabitants of Canaan by means of Israel’s conquest of the land (Lev 18:25; 2 Kin 16:3), decreeing their total annihilation. In Israel, God decreed judgment on Achan, who took some of the things dedicated to the Lord for himself (Josh 7:24-25), after which “Yahweh turned from the fierceness of His anger” (v. 26). We note also that not only Achan perished, but his family as well. The same occurred in the case of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (Num 16:27). A detailed discussion of this principle of “corporate punishment” is found in book 4 of this series in chapter 7, “Union with Christ.”

Joshua predicted future judgment if God’s people turned to idols (Josh 23:16; 24:20). The entire book of Judges relates Israel’s constant straying from the Lord and the chastisement they received for it (see Judg 2:13-15). In the book of Judges we encounter an example where God repaid someone “according to their deeds.” The Gentile ruler Adoni-bezek acknowledged, "Seventy kings with their thumbs and their big toes cut off used to gather up {scraps} under my table; as I have done, so God has repaid me" (Judg 1:6-7). Abimelech and the inhabitants of Shechem experienced a similar result (Judg 9:24-25, 56-57).

We can also cite Yahweh’s punishment of David in the case of Uriah and Bathsheba:

“Why have you despised the word of the Yahweh by doing evil in His sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the sons of Ammon. Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised Me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.” Thus says Yahweh, “Behold, I will raise up evil against you from your own household; I will even take your wives before your eyes and give {them} to your companion, and he will lie with your wives in broad daylight” (2 Sam 12:9-11).

This principle of reciprocity is expressed in the following text: “With the kind You show Yourself kind, with the blameless You show Yourself blameless; with the pure You show Yourself pure, and with the perverted You show Yourself astute” (2 Sam 22:26-27).

The song of Hanna contains several references to Yahweh’s justice: “With Him actions are weighed” (1 Sam 2:3); “Those who were full hire themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry cease {to hunger}. Even the barren gives birth to seven, but she who has many children languishes” (1 Sam 2:5); and, “Yahweh will judge the ends of the earth” (1 Sam 2:10).

The books of Samuel repeat the fact that the Lord does not always judge immediately. God used Saul to execute justice on Amalek for what the latter did to the people of Israel years earlier when they came out of Egypt (1 Sam 15:2). In a similar way, God punished Israel for sins earlier committed by Saul, until they executed the sons of Saul (2 Sam 21:1-9). In this instance, we observe another example of the principle that a country or a family can suffer for the sins of the leader or father of that group. Another example is found in 1 Chronicles 21:7, where Yahweh punished the inhabitants of Jerusalem for David’s “illegal” census (1 Chr 21:7).

In the first section of the First Book of Kings, we read the history of King Solomon. Before his death, David charged the new king to punish certain parties and reward others, which David was unable to do during his life (1 Kin 2:5-9; 31ff). When Solomon became king, he prayed to Yahweh for wisdom in rendering judgments for His people (1 Kin 8:31-32). However, when Solomon turned to idols, God removed most of his kingdom from him (1 Kin 11:11ff) and warned him of more misfortunes if his sons followed idols (1 Kin 9:6-9).

Nonetheless, the northern kings of Israel immediately began worshipping false gods and were punished for it: Jeroboam (1 Kin 14:7-11), Baasha (1 Kin 16:1-4), and Ahab, who, together with his wife Jezebel, were punished for the murder of Naboth (1 Kin 21:21, 23).

In the Second Book of Kings, we discover another example both of reciprocal judgment and of corporate punishment – the leprosy of Naaman clang to Gehazi and his descendants (2 Kin 5:27). This book also records the punishment of children themselves for mocking Yahweh’s prophet (2 Kin 2:23-25). A similar example of punishment for disrespect is described in 2 Chronicles 26:16-19, where Uzziah is struck with leprosy for desecration of God’s temple. Later, when the Assyrian army blasphemed the God of Israel, they received retribution from Him (2 Chr 32:17-21).

The most striking example of God’s judgment the in books of Kings was the exile of Israel in fulfillment of Moses’ prophecy (Deut 28:48ff): first, the Northern Kingdom, then the Southern Kingdom. God progressively diminished the Northern Kingdom (2 Kin 15:29) and eventually sent the remnant in exile to Assyria (2 Kin 17). God punished not only by means of foreign armies, but also through wild animals, which afflicted the new inhabitants of the Northern Kingdom for their lack of reverence (2 Kin 17:25-26).

Concerning the Southern Kingdom, Yahweh was angered by the wickedness of Manasseh (2 Kin 21:6). Due to his sins, judgment of the Southern Kingdom became inevitable in spite of the reforms of Josiah (2 Kin 21:10-15; 23:26-27; 24:3-4). The tragic fall of the Southern Kingdom is recorded in chapter 25 of 2 Kings.

On the other hand, we note in the historical books that upon repentance Yahweh rescinds His judgments, as in the case of Rehoboam (2 Chr 12:1-6) and Ahab (1 Kin 21:29). On the other hand, some previously good kings later turned away from God, such as Joash (2 Chr 24:17-18).

The historical books contain not a few examples of God’s wrath, usually toward idolatry (see Judg 2:12-14, 20; 3:8, 10; 3 Цар. 11:9; 22:53; 4 Цар. 13:3; 17:18; 22:15-17; 2 Chr 28:11-13; 29:8-10). As mentioned before, Yahweh is a “jealous God” and expects His people to be faithful to Him.

In the poetic books, God is portrayed as the righteous judge (Ps 75:7; 7:11; 51:4). He loves righteousness and justice (Ps 33:5; 37:28) and justice characterizes His ways (Ps 111:7). Injustice, however, is an abomination to him (Prov 17:15; 20:10, 23). He is the source of justice (Prov 29:26), which is the foundation of His throne (Ps 89:14; 97:2).

He punishes the wicked (Ps 64:7; 68:21; 92:9; 107:11-12; 145:20; 147:6) and removes them from the land (Ps 119:119; сf. 34:16). He rewards the righteous (Ps 75:10; 1:6; 7:10). He repays people according to their deeds (Ps 62:12). He defends the poor and oppressed (Ps 9:10-19, 10:12-14; 12:5; 76:9; 103:6; 107:41; 140:12; 144:5-8; Prov 23:10-11) and expects His judges to do likewise (Ps 82:1-4). He desires honesty (Prov 11:1: 20:20, 23). He delivers from enemies (Ps 7:7).

Yahweh judges His people (Ps 49:4; 105:40-42), and the whole earth as well (Ps 9:19; 79:6). He will judge all in its time (Ecc 3:16-17; 12:14; Ps 75:2), although the sinner may prosper at present (Ps 10:4-6), which may sometimes puzzle us (Ps 73). Yet, the wicked will fall into the pit which they have dug for themselves (Ps 57:6).

For the wicked, God’s judgments are fearful, but the righteous rejoice in them (Prov 21:15). The psalmist writes, “Your righteousness is like the mountains of God; Your judgments are {like} a great deep” (Ps 36:6). Not infrequently, the psalmist appeals to the Lord in prayer to judge (Ps 5:10; 10:15; 94:1-3; 109:1ff; 119:126).

The poetical books speak of God’s wrath. He has indignation each day (Ps 7:11). We also read of the cup of the Lord’s wrath (Ps 75:8). No one can “stand in Your presence when once You are angry” (Ps 76:7). Yahweh’s wrath is provoked by: rebellion (Ps 2:3-5), idolatry (Ps 78:58-59), unbelief (Ps 78:21-22, 31-32), love of violence (Ps 11:5). Proverbs chapter six lists seven things the Lord hates:

There are six things which Yahweh hates, yes, seven which are an abomination to Him: Haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that run rapidly to evil, a false witness {who} utters lies, And one who spreads strife among brothers (Prov 6:16-19).

Yahweh can show wrath without mercy (Ps 78:50), as described below:

Clouds and thick darkness surround Him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne. Fire goes before Him and burns up His adversaries round about. His lightnings lit up the world; the earth saw and trembled. The mountains melted like wax at the presence of Yahweh, at the presence of the Lord of the whole earth. The heavens declare His righteousness, and all the peoples have seen His glory (Ps 97:2-5)

The prophetic books add their witness to Yahweh’s just nature. They testify that “I, Yahweh, love justice” (Isa 61:8), “I remember all their wickedness” (Hos 7:2), He “avenges” (Joel 3:19-21) and “will by no means leave {the guilty} unpunished” (Nah 1:3), yet he has “no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies” (Ezek 18:32; 33:11).

The fundamental principle of God’s justice revealed in the Old Testament is that He gives “to each man according to his ways, according to the results of his deeds” (Jer 17:10).[[1]](#footnote-1) Often this principle is expressed in so-called “reciprocal judgment,” when God judges in a way corresponding to the sin committed, as we see in the following texts:[[2]](#footnote-2)

- Woe to you, O destroyer, while you were not destroyed; and he who is treacherous, while {others} did not deal treacherously with him. As soon as you finish destroying, you will be destroyed; as soon as you cease to deal treacherously, {others} will deal treacherously with you” (Isa 33:1).

- As you have done, it will be done to you. Your dealings will return on your own head. Because just as you drank on My holy mountain, all the nations will drink continually. They will drink and swallow and become as if they had never existed (Obad 15-16).

We can cite other examples of this principle. God punishes with thirst those who love wine (Isa 5:11-13). He humbles the proud (Isa 14:14-15; 47:1-11). Those who lead into captivity are so led themselves (Isa 14:2). The prophets who do not warn of the coming sword and famine will perish by sword and famine (Jer 14:15). Those who worship foreign gods will be sent to foreign lands (Jer 5:19).

The prophets describe how Yahweh may punish. A key passage here in Ezekiel 14:21, where are listed “four severe judgments”: sword, famine, wild beasts, and plague. The prophets emphasize most of all, though, military assaults. To punish sin, Yahweh raises up enemies (Jer 32:23; Hab 1:5-11), gives up sinners to defeat (Isa 3:25; 59:17-18), siege (Lam 4:1-10), and exile (Ezek 12:11-20; 22:13-16).

Yahweh judges for various reasons: injustice toward others (Jer 34:17-22), an extravagant lifestyle (Amos 6:4-7), the sins of leaders (Mic 3:12), etc. The sins most commonly mentioned, however, are pride and idolatry. Many prophets speak against idolatry: Isaiah (2:8), Jeremiah (1:13-16;17:3-4; 32:29), Ezekiel (14:8; 15:1-8; 23:22, 45-46), Hosea (10:2-15; 11:5-6), Micah (1:6-9), and others. Against pride: Isaiah (16:7-11; 22:1-3; 23:9; 25:10-12), Ezekiel (29-32), Hosea (7:16), and others.

In the prophetic books, Yahweh’s judgments are often severe. He overturns the strong and humbles the proud (Obad 2-4; Amos 5:9). No one can flee from Him (Amos 9:1-4; Mic 2:3). He sometimes shows no mercy (Amos 7:7-9; 8:2). After punishment comes a time of mourning (Amos 5:16-17). Yahweh assures that after it has been revealed how sinners have behaved, He will be vindicated in His judgments (Ezek 14:21-23).

Here are a few texts from various prophets describing the wrath of Yahweh:

- Isaiah: “I trod down the peoples in My anger And made them drunk in My wrath, and I poured out their lifeblood on the earth” (63:6).[[3]](#footnote-3)

- Jeremiah: “At His wrath the earth quakes, and the nations cannot endure His indignation” (10:10).[[4]](#footnote-4)

- Ezekiel: “Therefore, I indeed will deal in wrath. My eye will have no pity nor will I spare; and though they cry in My ears with a loud voice, yet I will not listen to them” (8:18).[[5]](#footnote-5)

- Hosea: “All their evil is at Gilgal; indeed, I came to hate them there! Because of the wickedness of their deeds I will drive them out of My house! I will love them no more” (9:15; сf. 12:14).

- Joel: “The day of the LORD is indeed great and very awesome, and who can endure it?” (2:11).

God’s judgment leads to liberation for the oppressed: “You have been a defense for the helpless, a defense for the needy in his distress, a refuge from the storm, a shade from the heat; for the breath of the ruthless is like a {rain} storm {against} a wall” (Isa 25:4). They receive rest (Isa 14:3, 28-32) and will triumph over their enemies (Isa 26:5-6; 33:23).

God’s judgment can be upon any group of people. He punishes His people for violations of the covenant: “’Shall I not punish these {people,}’ declares Yahweh, ‘And on a nation such as this Shall I not avenge Myself?.... For the house of Israel and the house of Judah Have dealt very treacherously with Me,’ declares Yahweh” (Jer 5:9-11). The Lord will judge the Gentiles as well, especially in regard to their treatment of Israel. In fact, all of the major prophets devote entire sections of their books to the rebuke of the nations (Isa 13-23; Jer 44-51; Ezek 25-32; Dan chps. 2 and 7). In the end, God will judge the whole world (Isa 24:1-6; Zeph 1:1-3).

Concerning the timing of Yahweh’s judgments, as mentioned before, it is not always immediate, since the Lord makes room for repentance. Therefore, people sometimes wonder why God did not intervene sooner (Hab 1:1-4). God has appointed the “Day of the Lord” (see Amos 5:18-20). This term can refer to a specific time of judgment on God’s people (Joel 1:15; 2:2), or to His eschatological judgment (Isa 13:9-13).

When Yahweh warns of coming judgment, He expects a response of repentance. A good example of such a response was the people of Nineveh, who repented upon Jonah’s preaching (Jonah 3). Yet, the books of the prophets contain many instances where Israel did not heed Yahweh’s warnings and persisted in disobedience (Isa 66:4; Jer 35:15). A very remarkable case is when the Southern Kingdom continued to rebel even after the exile to Babylon (Jer 3:6-11). The prophet Isaiah expounds on this type of disobedience:

He said, “Go, and tell this people: ‘Keep on listening, but do not perceive; keep on looking, but do not understand.’ Render the hearts of this people insensitive, their ears dull, and their eyes dim, otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and return and be healed” (Isa 6:9-11).

Finally, even the innocent can suffer along with the guilty when Yahweh executes a general judgment on His people. Such was the case for Baruch, Jeremiah’s assistant, although his life was nonetheless spared (Jer 45:1-5). Ezekiel also writes that God provides protection for “the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations which are being committed in its midst” (Ezek 9:4).

We conclude our survey of the Old Testament with the books of the exile. Again, we note Yahweh’s displeasure with human pride, such as in the case of Edom (Mal 1:4) and Nebuchadnezzar. After experiencing Yahweh’s chastisement, Nebuchadnezzar readily acknowledged that God is “able to humble those who walk in pride” (Dan 4:37).

These books speak of God’s punishment of the Gentiles (Zech 9:1-7) as well as of backslidden Israel (Ezra 8:22). Since Yahweh is slow to punish, people sometimes question His justice (Mal 2:17). Yet God assures that a day of judgment is coming (Mal 4:1). Daniel beheld in a vision the Ancient of Days, who sat in judgment (Dan 7:10).

Finally, in the book of Esther we observe several interesting examples of reciprocal judgment. First, Haman sought honor for himself, but instead received shame (Est 6:4-11). Second, he was hung on the tree which he had prepared for Mordecai’s execution (Est 7:9-10). Third, on the day appointed for the annihilation of the Jews, they routed their enemies (Est 9:1).

The New Testament joins the Old Testament in declaring that the Lord is “the Judge of all” (Heb 12:23) and that there is “one Lawgiver and Judge,” who is a “righteous Judge” (2 Tim 4:8) and will “judge the living and the dead” (2 Tim 4:1). He judges “without partiality” (Rom 2:11; 1 Pet 1:17).

In the Gospels, Jesus openly speaks of God’s eschatological judgment and the punishment to follow. In His Sermon on the Mount, He stresses the severity of God’s judgment. Even hatred and lust can lead to eternal damnation (Matt 5:21-30). Therefore, employing hyperbole, He states that it is better to lose a body part that to lose one’s soul (Mk 9:43-48). Jesus taught to fear the one “who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt 10:28). At the same time, He promised mercy to those who show mercy (Matt 7:1-2: Lk 6:37).

God’s judgement is to be executed by the Son of Man (Matt 25:31-46; Jn 5:22; Acts 10:42; 17:31). He is qualified for the task since He is not only the Son of God, but also the Son of Man, who knows by experience the trials and temptations people face (Jn 5:27).

In one sense, God’s judgment has already taken place by the coming of Christ into the world. The apostle John comments on this. Jesus’ coming separates light from darkness and the children of God from the children of the devil (Jn 3:19; 9:39; 12:31). The Holy Spirit convicts the world of sin and judgment (Jn 16:8). The prince of this world is already cast out (Jn 12:31; 16:11). God’s judgment will depend on how people respond to Christ and His Word (Jn 12:47-48). Consequently, believers in Him do not enter into judgment (Jn 5:24).

In the initial chapters of Paul’s letter to the Romans, he stresses the Lord’s righteousness and demonstrates that all people are under condemnation for sin: both “sinners” from the Gentiles (chp. 1), and “legalists” from the Jews (chp. 2). Paul’s conclusion: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). Along with this, however, Paul reveals the great truth that through the propitiation accomplished by Christ, God is “just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom 3:26).

To the Corinthians, Paul comments on the Lord’s discipline of His Church. He chastises believers “so that we will not be condemned along with the world” (1 Cor 11:32). In addition, in his second epistle he reveals that all believers will stand before the judgment seat of Christ to receive an evaluation of their lives (2 Cor 5:10, сf. Rom 14:10-12). In this connection, Paul anticipates receiving from the Lord the “crown of righteousness” (2 Tim 4:8).

In other writings, Paul asserts that suffering for Christ will result in punishment for the persecutor, but relief for the persecuted. By this, the Lord’s justice is demonstrated (2 Thes 1:4-7). Interestingly, Paul also relates in this epistle that those who reject the love of the truth will receive a “deluding influence” from the Lord, which will lead them into judgment (2 Thes 2:11-12). Finally, Paul informs Timothy that God’s judgments can occur at different times: “The sins of some men are quite evident, going before them to judgment; for others, their {sins} follow after” (1 Tim 5:24).

The author of Hebrews expounds on the nature of the Lord’s justice by reflecting on the Mosaic Law: “Every transgression and disobedience received a just penalty” (Heb 2:2). This concept is called God’s distributive justice and is discussed below.

In Hebrews chapter 12, we read of God’s eschatological judgment: “And His voice shook the earth then, but now He has promised, saying, ’Yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heaven.’ This {expression,} ‘Yet once more,’ denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, so that those things which cannot be shaken may remain” (Heb 12:26-27). The Lord’s judgment is eternal (Heb 6:2). It occurs after death (Heb 9:27).

The author of Hebrews employs the truth of God’s judgment to motivate his readers to hold fast their faith: “Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire” (Heb 9:28-29). He cautions his readers, “Fornicators and adulterers God will judge” (Heb 13:4).

The following warning is directly addressed to apostates:

Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on {the testimony of} two or three witnesses. How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge his people.” It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb 10:28-31).

Peter and Jude also warn against falling away from Christ. The contents of 2 Peter 2 and Jude are nearly identical. They both address the issue of false teachers and false brethren, who have “crept into” the Church (Jude 4). Both Peter and Jude cite Old Testament examples of the Lord’s judgments and apply them to these false brethren. In particular, they remind their readers of those who rebelled against the Lord in the wilderness, of the flood in Noah’s day, of fallen angels, of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, of “the way of Cain,” “the error of Balaam,” and “the rebellion of Korah” (Jude 11). They urge true believers not to follow the example of such persons.

In his first epistle, Peter likewise exhorts believers with the following words: “If you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay {on earth}” (1 Pet 1:17), and, “For {it is} time for judgment to begin with the household of God” (1 Pet 4:17). Furthermore, in his second epistle, Peter warns those who mock the promise of Christ’s Second Coming. He reminds his readers of God’s destruction of the world by a flood, and then asserts, “But by His word the present heavens and earth are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men” (2 Pet 3:7).

James draws our attention to relationships between people (Jam 5:4) and to the Lord’s judgment of believers. He warns that teachers are subject to a stricter judgment (Jam 3:1). His epistle often relates how to avoid judgement by not judging others and showing mercy instead (Jam 2:4, 12-13; 4:11-12; 5:9). John speaks of this as well, relating that love provides us “confidence in the day of judgment” (1 Jn 4:17).

The final New Testament book, the book of Revelation, is nearly completely devoted to the topic of the Lord’s judgments. In chapters 2-3, Jesus evaluates the conduct of various congregations, sometimes praising them, and sometimes reproving them. Later, the book describes God’s judgement on the world during the Great Tribulation, which includes the seven seals (chps. 6-8), the seven trumpets (chps. 8-11), and the seven bowls (chps. 15-16). Furthermore, “Mystery Babylon” is judged for perverting the nations of the world (chps. 17-18). Finally, before the creation of the new heavens and the new earth, the White Throne Judgment takes place. From before the Judge “earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them” (Rev 20:11). The dead are “judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds” (Rev 20:12). Only those whose names are “written in the book of life” will escape punishment in the lake of fire (Rev 20:15).

**2. Theological Considerations**

In this section, we will repeat and highlight the key elements concerning God’s justice and refute several views on this theme that vary from the biblical witness.

In His justice, the Lord rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. Some texts mention both aspects, such as Romans 2:7-8: “…to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

When we speak of God rewarding the righteous, we must be careful to qualify that people in no way merit justification before the Lord on the basis of their works. Paul clearly states, “By the works of the Law no flesh will be justified” (Gal 2:16). Only if one perfectly fulfills the Law in every detail can that individual expect justification by works. Yet, all people commit sin. Therefore, when Paul speaks in Romans 2:7-8 of those who “by perseverance in doing good,” he is speaking only theoretically. In reality, no one lives that way.

We must also take into consideration that people, as the Lord’s creatures, are obligated to serve Him. No one deserves credit for serving or obeying Him, since all belongs to Him. Perfect obedience is simply a person’s due. Jesus taught that after servants perform all they were asked to do, they should say, “We are unworthy slaves; we have done {only} that which we ought to have done” (Lk 17:10). Therefore, we must consider any “reward” received from the Lord for good works a manifestation of His unmerited favor toward us.[[7]](#footnote-7)

How can we characterize God’s justice? First, it is impartial. God treats all people the same: “For there is no partiality with God” (Rom 2:11).[[8]](#footnote-8) An important facet of the Lord’s justice is expressed in the phrase “distributive justice.” This means that for every violation of God’s laws, a corresponding punishment must be applied in full measure (see Heb 2:2). God never forgives sin without receiving full retribution for it. As it is written, “Whatever a man sows, this he will also reap” (Gal 6:7), the Lord “renders to every man according to what he has done” (Rev 22:12), and, “He will by no means leave {the guilty} unpunished” (Ex 34:7).[[9]](#footnote-9)

Louis Berkhof provides a fine description of God’s distributive justice: “(God’s distributive justice) demands that the requirements of the law be met *in every particular*, and which, in the case of transgression, makes *full satisfaction* by punishment imperative.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

The Old Testament sacrificial system corresponded to God’s distributive justice. It obliged the violator to bring a specific sacrifice to receive forgiveness from the Lord. Without this retribution there was no forgiveness. Every sin must be covered by the blood of the sacrificial animal. In this light, one can better comprehend eternal punishment. If every transgression receives a corresponding punishment, and if God is a Being of infinite quality, then a sin against an infinite Being merits an eternal punishment.

Several aberrant teachings have appeared concerning this truth. Some feel that God has no need for retribution, but that He forgives sins freely. Others feel that retribution for sin is some sort of spiritual law that automatically assigns to the sinner a corresponding punishment for his or her transgression without God’s direct involvement. Yet, these theories contradict the biblical teaching of God’s distributive justice.

In this context, we may also mention the “governmental theory” of Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), who theorized that God did not require retribution for sin, but freely forgave. Nonetheless, as Ruler of the world He punishes sin in order to maintain order in the world. Hence, the Lord does not punish in accord with His distributive justice, but only as much as needed to curb future transgressions. The goal of Christ’s crucifixion was not to redeem the world from sin, but to demonstrate the seriousness of sin. However, this theory again contradicts the biblical view of God’s distributive justice and Christ’s redemptive sacrifice on the cross.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Another characteristic of Yahweh’s justice is His defense of the poor and oppressed. He especially protects those who cannot protect themselves: “A father of the fatherless and a judge for the widows, is God in His holy habitation” (Ps 68:5).[[12]](#footnote-12)

The good news is that God accepts a substitute for people’s sins. In other words, another individual can accept the punishment assigned to the sinner and thereby satisfy the Lord’s justice and make a way for forgiveness of sins. In virtue of Christ’s death for the sins of the world, Yahweh can justify the sinner and, at the same time, remain just.

Paul writes about God’s marvelous salvation plan that God is “just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom 3:26). Shedd aptly comments, “Justice necessarily demands that sin be punished, but not necessarily in the person of the sinner.”[[13]](#footnote-13) By the death of Christ, every sin was fully paid for, and now the sinner can receive forgiveness.

Why does God punish sin? Several reasons exist. First, He thereby corrects transgressors, bringing them to repentance. Isaiah writes, “Yahweh will strike Egypt, striking but healing; so they will return to Yahweh, and He will respond to them and will heal them” (Isa 19:22). Second, God’s punishment serves as a warning to others, so that they will not follow that path. After the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira, “great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things” (Acts 5:11).

The final reason is that a God of justice must receive retribution for sin. As was stated in connection with the Lord’s distributive justice, He cannot just forgive sin without a full recompense (Matt 16:27).[[14]](#footnote-14) Pink writes that God is not ashamed of His wrath. Wrath is “the holiness of God stirred to activity against sin.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Without wrath, Yahweh’s nature would not be complete.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Several practical application stand out in light of the doctrine of God’s justice. The first is humility. God’s justice demands perfect obedience to avert punishment, but no one is able to perform it. This brings us to a place of humility before the Lord and an admission of our guilt. We cry out like the tax collector in Jesus’ parable, “God, be merciful to me, the sinner” (Lk 18:13). Second, in anticipation of God’s just judgment for sin, we flee to Christ for forgiveness and trust in His saving work. Our trust is in Jesus, the one “who rescues us from the wrath to come” (1 Thes 1:10).

Third, we hear a call to mercy. After being forgiven such a huge debt, we cannot fail to forgive others their offenses toward us, as Jesus taught in His parable in Matthew chapter 18. In James’ words, “Mercy triumphs over judgment.” (Jam 2:13). Fourth, this doctrine motivates us to holy living. After being forgiven of sin by God’s mercy, the greatest insult to His honor would be to willfully return to a life of sin (2 Pet 2:20-22). Finally, in imitation of the Lord, we should advance the cause of justice.

1. Also see Jer 25:14; 32:19; 51:56; Ezek 11:21; 18:30; 33:20; Hos 12:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Also see Jer 50:15. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Also see 2:10, 19-21; 5:25; 9:12-21; 10:4-6; 42:25; 34:1-10; 51:17-20; 57:17. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Also see 4:8, 26; 7:20; 15:14; 17:4; 21:5-7; 23:19-23; 25:15-16; 32:30-32; 36:7-8; 44:5-6; Lam 2:1-9; 1:11; 3:1-18; 4:11,16. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Also see 5:11-13; 6:12; 7:1-9; 9:10; 13:10, 15; 17:19; 20:8; 21:17; 22:17-22; 24:3-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Thiessen H. C. Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology – Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1949. – P. 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., p. 293. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Henry C. F. H. God, Revelation, and Authority. – Waco, TX: Word Books, 1976-1983. – V. 6. – P. 405; Erickson M. J. Christian Theology. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983. – V. 1. – P. 288. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Henry, v. 6, p. 407. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Berkhof L. The History of Christian Doctrine. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1937. – P. 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Erickson, Christian Theology, v. 2, p. 791-792. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Henry, v. 6, p. 408-409. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Shedd W., Thayer G., Gomes A. W. Dogmatic Theology. – 3rd ed. – Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub., 2003. – P. 297-298. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Strong A. H. Systematic Theology. – 1886. – P. 294, 299. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Pink A. W. The Attributes of God. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1975. – P. 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)